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Talks to Resolve Impasse in Wisconsin Flounder

By **MONICA DAVEY**

CHICAGO — More than two weeks after Wisconsin lawmakers split over a bill that would vastly curtail collective bargaining for public workers, even negotiations over the negotiations have become matters of division, fury and dueling public critiques.

Scott Fitzgerald, the Republican leader in Wisconsin's Senate, described the progress of talks with 14 Senate Democrats who left the state last month to block a vote on the bill as "negotiating with Jell-O." And in [a letter](#) about the talks to his Democratic counterpart, Mr. Fitzgerald questioned his colleague's "grasp of reality."

Chris Larson, one of the Senate Democrats, accused Mr. Fitzgerald and Gov. [Scott Walker](#), the Republican who proposed the measure, of misleading the public, trying to shift blame to the Democrats, and "throwing people who were negotiating in earnest under the bus."

And it was only Monday.

While those on both sides of Wisconsin's partisan split over collective bargaining rights say they have in recent days engaged in private discussions over the matter, little progress toward compromise has emerged. If anything, the Republicans and Democrats in Wisconsin appeared further apart than ever over a matter that has eclipsed all other work in the state Capitol and become the most visible in a series of such battles in statehouses around the country.

That said, at least two Democrats said that an end to the standoff in Wisconsin may be drawing near, even if it means returning to the state and allowing a vote to take place on an unchanged and, in their view, unacceptable measure to cut collective bargaining rights — a measure that is expected to pass in the Republican-dominated State Senate once a quorum is met.

"You reach a point where you say, 'If our goal was to enlighten the public, we've done it,'" Bob Jauch, one of the missing Democrats who took part in negotiations as recently as Sunday, said on Monday evening. "There's a time — and the time seems to be drawing near — where our usefulness is wearing thin."

Timothy Cullen, another of the Senate Democrats, said, "This is a movement that's bigger than us, so it's time to go home and debate and make the case on other issues."

Other Senate Democrats said on Monday that they were still determined that the collective

bargaining cuts in Mr. Walker's plan be rewritten. A spokesman for Mark Miller, the Senate Democratic leader, said that no final decision had been made about how soon to return to Wisconsin.

"They meet every day," the spokesman, Mike Browne, said, "and they discuss how to get back."

Most of Indiana's House Democrats remained at a motel in Illinois on Monday, having also left their state last month to prevent a quorum on legislation related to collective bargaining rights and education.

In Ohio, the Republican-dominated House is expected later this week to give final approval to legislation to cut collective bargaining rights for public sector workers by banning strikes and placing the power of breaking labor impasses in the hands of local officials.

But in Wisconsin, where November's election brought one of the most significant flips from Democrats to Republicans, a week of negotiations clearly had fallen apart by Monday, and blame was being spread everywhere. The opposing sides traded pointed letters, which they shared with the news media. They traded conflicting versions of who had tried to talk to whom about what.

By midday on Monday, Mr. Walker, who has been governor since January, described an early-morning request from Mr. Miller, the leader of the Senate Democrats, for a resumption of discussions somewhere near the Wisconsin-Illinois border as "ridiculous."

At a news conference where he was flanked by Senator Fitzgerald and Jeff Fitzgerald, the Republican speaker of the State Assembly (and the brother of Senator Fitzgerald), Governor Walker described to reporters his view of negotiations in recent days. After talks last Wednesday with several Democrats at a McDonald's in Kenosha, not far from the Illinois border, Mr. Walker's aides had been buoyed by the possibility of a substantive deal, Mr. Walker said, only to have Mr. Miller "firmly standing in the way."

The Republicans said that the Democrats were divided over the negotiations, and that leadership was murky at best. The Democrats, meanwhile, said Governor Walker had shown little real interest in shifting from his position that curtailing collective bargaining was needed to solve the state's budget woes.

Mr. Walker's proposal would make changes to most public sector unions, limiting collective bargaining only to matters of wages and limiting raises to the [Consumer Price Index](#).

The Democrats left the state on Feb. 17, the day that a Senate vote was expected on Mr. Walker's measure.

