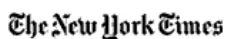


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## Ohio Senate Approves Union Bill

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)  
Published: March 2, 2011

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio took its first step Wednesday toward passing sweeping legislation that would curtail collective bargaining rights for public sector workers by banning strikes and putting the power of breaking labor impasses in the hands of local elected officials.

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Amid boos and shouts of “shame on you,” the Republican-controlled Ohio Senate voted 17 to 16 for the bill, with 6 Republicans voting against it.

The bill is expected to be passed next week in the House and signed into law by Gov. [John Kasich](#), who issued a statement applauding the Senate vote. Democratic lawmakers said they would take it to a ballot referendum this fall.

Unions call the bill the biggest blow to public sector workers since the legal framework was put in place to protect them in 1983. Republican lawmakers argued that it was required in order to keep financially pressed local governments solvent.

“This is the first big step in restoring fiscal responsibility in Ohio,” said [Kevin Bacon](#), a Republican senator.

The battle in Ohio has unfolded over the past month along with similar confrontations in Wisconsin and Indiana. Unlike in the other states, where Democrats are needed for a quorum, in Ohio, Republicans make a quorum on their own.

In Wisconsin, a standoff over legislation that would cut collective bargaining rights for public employees intensified. Democrats in the State Senate, who left Wisconsin last month to prevent a vote from taking place, learned that the Republicans left behind were taking steps to start fining missing lawmakers \$100 for each day they stay away.

Though some of the Democrats and Republicans met early in the week, it was clear by Wednesday that the sides were farther apart than ever. And each side suggested that the other caucus appeared to be fracturing under the tension. From an undisclosed location in Illinois, Mark Miller, a leader of the Senate Democrats, issued a statement accusing the Republicans of “schoolyard bully tactics.” Scott Fitzgerald, leader of the Senate Republicans, then issued his own and reminded the Democrats of Gov. [Scott Walker](#)’s warnings that some 1,500 state workers might be laid off soon if the lawmakers did not act on the bill.

In Ohio, Nina Turner, a Senate Democrat, said, “This bill seeks to vilify our public employees and turn what used to be the virtue of public service into a crime.” At its heart, the bill redraws rules governing how several hundred thousand public-sector workers bargain with the governments that employ them. Among the most objectionable parts, workers said, are the rules giving local officials the final say in breaking labor impasses. Currently, non-elected, third parties decide.

Shannon Jones, the senator who sponsored the bill, argued that elected bodies, like city councils, were responsible for appropriating taxpayer money and so should ultimately decide disputes involving it, an argument that Democrats and even some Republican rejected.

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“The elected representatives have the responsibility to oversee the services that people elected them to provide,” she said.

Republican senators who voted against the bill said many of its proposals were badly needed, but that it ultimately went too far, erasing too many rights for public-sector workers in a way that risks its repeal in a ballot referendum later.

One such senator, Bill Seitz, argued that the new rule was unfair because it placed the power to decide in the hands of city councils who would always take the side of local managers. His proposal to use judges, who are elected in Ohio and would be more neutral, was rejected.

“It’s like a husband and wife going to negotiate and it doesn’t work, so the wife gets everything she wants,” he said. “Who would go for that?”

Tim Grendell, another Republican who voted against the bill, argued that it was elected bodies that were largely responsible for the country’s current budget mess.

“The people we want to entrust the genie of the future to are those who created the morass of problems we are trying to solve,” he said. “That’s schizophrenic thinking.”

City administrators said they thought the law, which was amended over the weekend, had been softened in favor of public-sector workers, because it preserves the right to collective bargaining. Mike Bell, the mayor of Toledo, said the law would help ailing local governments “push a reset switch” when they have nothing left to offer at the bargaining table.

“Most contracts are silent on what to do when you can’t afford to pay your employees,” he said.

But the bill also bans the right to strike for all public-sector workers, an option currently forbidden only for emergency workers. Dissenting Republican senators said the stipulation made the right to collective bargaining that the bill ultimately preserved, purely cosmetic.

“Without having something to lose, collective bargaining is not bargaining, it’s just a conversation,” Mr. Grendell said.

Lawmakers who supported the bill said it would allow government to function more like the private sector, with the flexibility to have more control over its operating costs. But its opponents argued that the private sector had slashed older workers, something the new bill was in danger of allowing.

“Who says the private sector has the golden standard on what it means to treat folks?” Senator Turner said.

*Monica Davey contributed reporting from Chicago.*

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