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Wisconsin May Take an Ax to State Workers' Benefits and Their Unions

By **MONICA DAVEY** and **STEVEN GREENHOUSE**

Citing Wisconsin's gaping budget shortfall for this year and even larger ones expected in the years ahead, Gov. Scott Walker proposed a sweeping plan on Friday to cut benefits for public employees in the state and to take away most of their unions' ability to bargain.

The proposal by Mr. Walker, a Republican who was elected in November after pledging that he would get public workers' compensation "into line" with everyone else's, is expected to receive support next week in the State Legislature, where Republicans also won control of both chambers in the fall.

The prospect left union leaders, state and local employees and some Democrats stunned over the plan's scope and what it might signal for public-sector unions in the state. Union leaders began planning rallies in Madison and contacting lawmakers, pressing them to reject the idea.

Mr. Walker said Wisconsin was prepared for any fallout, noting in an interview that the National Guard was ready to step in to handle state duties, if need be.

"I'm just trying to balance my budget," Mr. Walker said. "To those who say why didn't I negotiate on this? I don't have anything to negotiate with. We don't have anything to give. Like practically every other state in the country, we're broke. And it's time to pay up."

State leaders across the country have talked about solving budget woes with actions that in other climates might have been politically impossible: cutting the salaries and pensions of government workers and limiting the power of labor unions.

But the plan in Wisconsin, which faces a \$137 million shortfall in the current budget and a gap in the billions for the coming cycle, is among the most far-reaching of such proposals to be delivered to lawmakers. Mr. Walker expects swift approval.

Among key provisions of Mr. Walker's plan: limiting collective bargaining for most state and local government employees to the issue of wages (instead of an array of issues, like health coverage or vacations); requiring government workers to contribute 5.8 percent of their pay to their pensions, much more than now; and requiring state employees to pay at least 12.6 percent of health care premiums (most pay about 6 percent now).

Mike Imbrogno, a cook at the [University of Wisconsin](#) in Madison who belongs to a union and

said he earns \$28,000 a year, described the move as an “attack” on working people.

“He’s basically trying to smash the last remaining organized upward pressure on wages and benefits in Wisconsin,” Mr. Imbrogno said. Governor Walker’s proposal would specifically remove the right of the university’s faculty and staff to bargain collectively.

Mr. Walker made several proposals that will weaken not just unions’ ability to bargain contracts, but also their finances and political clout.

His proposal would make it harder for unions to collect dues because the state would stop collecting the money from employee paychecks.

He would further weaken union treasuries by giving members of public-sector unions the right not to pay dues. In an unusual move, he would require secret-ballot votes each year at every public-sector union to determine whether a majority of workers still want to be unionized.

He would require public-employee unions to negotiate new contracts every year, an often lengthy process. And he would limit the raises of state employees and teachers to the [consumer price index](#), unless the public approves higher raises through a referendum. Exempted from those changes would be firefighters and law enforcement personnel.

“We think that the proposal that’s put forward, it just goes too far,” said Phil Neuenfeldt, president of the Wisconsin [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#) “The right to negotiate wages and benefits for a union is a fundamental underpinning of the American middle class.”

But Mr. Walker and Republican leaders said disassembling unions was not the point at all. The intent, Mr. Walker said, was to avoid balancing the budget some other way: by laying off some 6,000 state workers, and taking away [Medicaid](#) coverage for hundreds of thousands of children.

Wisconsin officials say Mr. Walker’s plan would save the state \$30 million in the current budget, and \$300 million in the next budget. “In these tough times, I think people are going to feel that this is not that much to ask,” said Jeff Fitzgerald, the Republican speaker of the State Assembly. “Everyone is going to have to pitch in.”