

MI Becomes Right-To-Work State Despite Protests

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LANSING, Mich. (AP) — In a dizzyingly short time span, Republicans have converted Michigan from a seemingly impregnable fortress of organized labor into a right-to-work state, leaving outgunned Democrats and union activists with little recourse but to shake their fists and seek retribution at the ballot box.

The state House swiftly approved two bills reducing unions' strength Tuesday, one dealing with private-sector workers and the other with public employees, as thousands of furious protesters at the state Capitol roared in vain. Republican Gov. Rick Snyder signed the measures into law within hours, calling them "pro-worker and pro-Michigan."

"Workers deserve the right to decide for themselves whether union membership benefits them," Snyder said. "Introducing freedom-to-work in Michigan will contribute to our state's economic comeback while preserving the roles of unions and collective bargaining."

House Speaker Jase Bolger exulted after the vote that Michigan's future "has never been brighter," while Democrats and union activists said workers had been doomed to ever-lower living standards. Lacking enough votes to block the measures or force a statewide referendum, opponents set their sights on the 2014 election.

"Passing these bills is an act of war on Michigan's middle class, and I hope the governor and the Republican legislators are ready for the fight that is about to ensue," said Gretchen Whitmer, the Senate Democratic leader.

As 1 of 24 states with right-to-work laws, Michigan will prohibit requiring nonunion employees to pay unions for negotiating contracts, representing them in grievances and other services. Supporters say the laws give workers freedom of association and promote job creation, while critics insist the real intent is to drain unions of funds need to bargain effectively.

Labor has suffered a series of setbacks in Rust Belt states since the 2010 election propelled tea party conservatives to power across much of the region. Even so, the ruthless efficiency with which Republicans prevailed on right-to-work was breathtaking in Michigan, birthplace of the United Auto Workers, where unions have long been political titans.

The seeds were planted two years ago with the election of Snyder, a former venture capitalist and CEO who pledged to make the state more business-friendly, and GOP supermajorities in the House and Senate. They have chipped away repeatedly at union power, even as Snyder insisted the big prize — right-to-work — was "not on

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my agenda."

Fearing the governor wouldn't be able to restrain his allies in the Legislature, labor waged a pre-emptive strike with a ballot initiative known as Proposal 2 that would have made right-to-work laws unconstitutional. It was soundly defeated in last month's election, and Snyder said Tuesday the unions had miscalculated by bringing the issue to center stage.

"I don't believe we would be standing here in this time frame if it hadn't been for Proposal 2," the governor said at a news conference after signing the bills. "After the election, there was an extreme escalation on right-to-work that was very divisive."

After days of private talks with legislative and union leaders, Snyder threw his support behind the measures last Thursday. Within hours, Senate Republicans had introduced and approved them without the usual committee hearings. After a mandatory five-day waiting period, the House did likewise Tuesday.

It happened so quickly that opponents had little time to generate the massive resistance put forward in Indiana, where right-to-work was approved earlier this year, and Wisconsin during consideration of a 2011 law curtailing collective bargaining rights for most state employees. Those measures provoked weeks of intense debate, with Democrats boycotting sessions to delay action and tens of thousands of activists occupying statehouses.

Still, Michigan unions mustered thousands of protesters who massed in the Capitol's hallways, rotunda and front lawn. Crowds formed before dawn on a chilly morning. Four oversized, inflatable toy rats bearing the names of Snyder and GOP legislative leaders were on display.

"They're selfish. They're greedy. They're Republican," said Susan Laurin, 60, of Saginaw, a secretary with the state Department of Transportation, wearing a hard hat like many fellow demonstrators.

Seventh-grade teacher Jack Johnson, of East Lansing, said the GOP's goal was obvious: "You take away money from the unions and they can't support the Democratic candidates, and the Republicans take over."

"No justice, no peace!" protesters chanted, the chorus reaching a deafening din as the House prepared to vote. "Shame on you!" they shouted from the House gallery as the results were announced.

Republicans insisted the bills were given adequate consideration, as the issue had been debated across the state for years. Snyder said he saw no reason to delay signing the measures, especially with opponents still hoping to dissuade him.

"They can finish up, and they can go home because they know ... making more comments on that is not going to change the outcome," he said. "I view this as simply trying to get this issue behind us."

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Don't count on it, state Democratic Chairman Mark Brewer retorted.

"If Gov. Snyder thinks that Michigan citizens will go home and forget about what happened in Lansing today, he is sorely mistaken," state Democratic Chairman Mark Brewer said. "Snyder has set the tone for the next two years, and this fight is not over."

Snyder said he expects the law to be challenged in court but believes it will stand. Opponents also said they might seek recalls of some legislators.

Meanwhile, unions must adapt to a new reality.

The laws take effect 90 days after the Legislature adjourns. Even then, workers bound by existing contracts won't be able to stop paying union fees until those deals expire. But activists fear some will opt out at first opportunity.

"A lot of people like to freeload," said Sharon McMullen, an employee of the state Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs.

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