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Hundreds gather peacefully at Capitol over budget plans

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Lansing — More than 500 construction workers chanted and stomped their feet outside a House hearing room this afternoon to get the attention of lawmakers hearing testimony on repeal of prevailing wages.

The workers were among about 1,000 union members at the Capitol today to lobby lawmakers against Gov. Rick Snyder's budget and "anti-union" bills before the Legislature.

Roughly 50 workers were allowed into the hearing room before the doors were blocked by sergeants-at-arms of the state House. Hundreds left standing in the halls thundered "let us speak, let us speak" as the House Commerce Committee heard testimony in support of eliminating the law that requires workers on state, county and municipal construction projects be paid the prevailing wage for the area.

Union members plan to cram the gallery of the House chambers this afternoon when lawmakers are slated to discuss bills that would grant authority to emergency financial managers to toss out collective bargaining contracts.

Many union members paid calls on their lawmakers earlier this morning to ask them to vote no on changes to Public Act 72, the state's emergency financial manager act.

Tom Vanicelli, a United Steel Workers union member from Eastpointe, dropped by the office of state Rep. Anthony Forlini, R-Harrison Township.

"It's a union buster," Vanicelli told the lawmaker.

Forlini said he would vote for changes to the act, saying, "I'm not an anti-union guy, but I also know we've got to start moving forward.

"Some unions, and I'm not saying yours, are holding up the process."

"Man, I can't believe that — and he's Italian, too," Vanicelli said afterword, mentioning demonstrations over the past two weeks in Wisconsin, where workers have turned out by the tens of thousands to protest Republican Gov. Scott Walker's plan to abolish collective bargaining rights for most state workers, including 68,000 on Saturday. The Legislature there has been at an impasse, and the Wisconsin Senate's 14 Democrats have left the state to avoid voting on Walker's measures.

"It's going to happen here," Vanicelli said. "This is what's happening (in Wisconsin.)."

In addition to the union demonstration, a grass roots demonstration was planned in opposition to Snyder's budget, and a tea party demonstration also was planned in favor of budget spending cuts. A handful of tea partiers stood across from the church as union members streamed by earlier today.

"There's people wrapped around the building and there's cars coming," said Chris Michalakakis, secretary-treasurer of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, who appeared pleased by the low turnout among the tea partiers. "They're coming in by the dozen tea party members standing outside."

Bills target union rights

Bills before the Legislature would make Michigan a right-to-work state and curtail collective bargaining rights, including three House bills that would allow emergency financial managers appointed by Snyder to toss out union contracts.

"(Union members) are angry and scared," UAW Local 6000 spokesman Ray Holman said this morning. His local represents 17,000 state employees and about 8,000 retirees whose benefits are targeted for cutbacks. "The message is that there's a lot of anti-labor bills coming down, and we don't want a Wisconsin-type situation here with the takeover of cities and school districts, and our collective bargaining rights taken away."

Snyder's budget proposal presented to the Legislature on Thursday would slash statutory revenue sharing from school districts and cut funding for K-12 education by \$470 per pupil. Unions claim the cuts would push an unprecedented number of districts and communities into deficit, meaning they might be taken over by an emergency financial manager that could curtail their bargaining rights.

Protesters peaceful

At the Capitol, a mix of a few dozen people milled around in the cold this morning. Many carried signs and a variety of tea party flags. They included union members, citizens protesting spending cuts and tea party members supporting the same cuts.

Shortly after 10 a.m., tea party supporters agreed to move to the opposite side of the Capitol building from where union supporters had gathered and were chanting, "Proud to be union."

In front of the Legislature, a handful of Michigan State Police officers and Capitol security officers kept a distance between tea party supporters and other demonstrators, none of whom obtained an advance permit to rally.

At one point, about two dozen tea party supporters, many hoisting "Don't Tread on Me" flags, began marching toward the mostly pro-union group of a few dozen people gathered in front of the east Capitol steps. But they stopped about 50 feet away and eventually turned back, later regrouping near Capitol Avenue in front of the monument to Michigan's Civil War governor, Austin Blair.

"Recall Snyder" and "Don't Tax Grandma" were the messages on some of the anti-budget signs demonstrators carried. "Get Back to Work" and "I'm Not Getting Paid to Be Here" were among the messages on signs carried by tea party supporters.

The demonstration remained peaceful. Scott Hagerstrom, Michigan state director of Americans for Prosperity, was politely rebuffed when he tried to distribute leaflets in support of Walker to those in a line of marching union demonstrators.

"We actually have a lot of agreement," Hagerstrom said of his group, which favors making Michigan a right-to-work state, and the mainly union group protesting the budget. "We don't agree with taxing pensions."

Division over Snyder

Tea party supporters Annamaria Evans of Clarkston, Pat Miller of South Haven and Jack Stone of Lake Orion said they want Michigan to end collective bargaining rights for public employees, just as Walker has proposed in Wisconsin.

Miller, a member of the Southwest Michigan Tea Party Patriots, said he wants to see Snyder get as tough on unions as the Republican-controlled Michigan Legislature is.

Others protested Snyder's plan to tax pensions.

"I get \$1,049 a month," said Milan Pesko, a retired General Motors Corp. worker from Saginaw. "Why do they want to take that away from me?"

Karen Hale, a middle school teacher from Lapeer, was in front of the Capitol protesting education cuts she said would "devastate" school programs.

Susan Riggs of Davison, a member of Genesee County chapter of the National Organization for Women, said today she showed up to protest the emergency financial manager legislation that is part of Snyder's budget package.

Riggs said the legislation "takes away my right as an American citizen to vote for my officials."

Snyder's plan also offers \$1.8 billion in tax cuts to businesses that he says are critical to create jobs and spur Michigan out of prolonged recession. But it includes deep spending cuts and removes a wide array of tax credits and personal income tax exemptions.

"The priorities (of Snyder and the GOP-controlled Legislature) have been sending the money to the top of the food chain as opposed to investing in education, public safety and human services," Holman said.

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