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Amid Protests Over Cuts, Wisconsin Lawmakers Prepare to Vote

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

MADISON, Wis. — As furious protesters once again began gathering near the state [Capitol building](#), state senators were expected to vote on Thursday on a bill that would sharply curtail the collective bargaining rights and slash benefits for most public sector workers in the state.

Tensions were increasingly tense Thursday morning as the Senate prepared to take up the matter. Thousands of protesters crowded into a hallway outside the senate and pounded on windows, saying they intended to prevent members from entering. At least one senator had to call Capitol police for help to get through the crowd and inside. “Shut it down! Shut it down!” protesters chanted.

Madison public schools were closed for a second day on Thursday, as teachers called in sick to lobby at the Capitol against the sweeping proposal. More than a dozen other public school districts announced they were closed for the day as well.

Late into [Wednesday evening](#), a legislative committee approved the measure on a 12-to-4 vote that split along partisan lines, Republicans in favor and Democrats opposed. After an emotional debate, the committee made only minor changes to the proposal put forth last week by Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, clearing the way for what Mr. Walker hopes will be swift approval by both chambers by Friday.

The battle in Wisconsin, which some view as a precursor to similar fights in other states, was drawing attention around the country, including from Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#), who said he planned to talk to Mr. Walker by telephone on Thursday. “Where we’re fighting each other, where we’re divisive, where we’re demonizing or vilifying any group, including unions, I don’t think that helps us get where we need to go as a country,” [Mr. Duncan told CNN](#) on Thursday morning.

[President Obama](#) also weighed in during an interview Wednesday with a Wisconsin TV station, “I think it’s very important for us to understand that public employees, they’re our