

INDIANAPOLIS — In another blow to organized labor in the traditionally union heavy Midwest, Indiana is poised to become the first right-to-work state in more than a decade after Republican lawmakers cleared the way on Wednesday to ban unions from collecting mandatory fees from workers.

Over the past year, Republicans have pushed for other anti-union laws in battleground Rust Belt states where many of the country's manufacturing jobs reside, including Wisconsin and Ohio, but they also have faced backlash from Democrats and union supporters. Wisconsin last year stripped public sector unions of collective bargaining rights. Despite massive protests outside the Capitol, Wisconsin's GOP-dominated Assembly passed a law backed by Gov. Scott Walker in March that strips nearly all collective bargaining rights from organized labor. Walker is now preparing for a recall election after opponents turned in a million signatures aimed at forcing a vote and ousting him from office. In November, Ohio voters repealed a law limiting collective bargaining rights that was championed by Gov. John Kasich and fellow Republican lawmakers.

Indiana would mark the first win in 10 years for national right-to-work advocates who have pushed unsuccessfully for the measure in other states following a Republican sweep of statehouses in 2010. But few right-work states boast Indiana's union clout, borne of a long manufacturing legacy.

Oklahoma, with its rural-based economy that produces comparatively fewer union jobs than Indiana, passed right-to-work legislation in 2001.

Indiana's vote came after weeks of protest by minority Democrats who tried various tactics to stop the bill. They refused to show up to debate despite the threat of fines that totaled \$1,000 per day and introduced dozens of amendments aimed at delaying a vote. But conceding their tactics could not last forever because they were outnumbered, they finally agreed to allow the vote to take place.

The House voted 54-44 Wednesday to make Indiana the nation's 23rd right-to-work state. The measure is expected to face little opposition in Indiana's Republican-controlled Senate and could reach Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels' desk shortly before the Feb. 5 Super Bowl in Indianapolis.

"This announces, especially in the Rust Belt, that we are open for business here," Republican House Speaker Brian Bosma said of the right-to-work proposal that would ban unions from collecting mandatory representation fees from workers.

House Minority Leader Patrick Bauer said the legislative battle was an "unusual fight" from the beginning, but Democrats waged a noble effort against majority Republicans determined to pass the bill.

"What did they fight for? They fought for less pay, less workplace safety and less health care. This is their only job plank: job creation for less pay with the so-called right to work for less bill."

Hundreds of union protesters packed the halls of the Statehouse again Wednesday, chanting "Kill the Bill!" and cheering Democrats who had stalled the measure since the start of the year.

Few Republicans spoke in favor of the measure during the two-and-a-half hours of debate. Instead Democratic opponents and a handful of Republicans who crossed party lines to oppose the measure, delivered emotional pleas to block it.

Democratic Rep. Linda Lawson called the Republican measure an attack on the union strongholds throughout the state. "What you are doing is destroying my community!" said Lawson, who represents a northwest Indiana district packed with heavy manufacturers and a major BP oil refinery.

"What if I came into your community and said 'No more cows' and 'No more pigs?'" she said, referring to the agriculturally heavy districts represented by many of the Republicans who supported the bill.

Republicans foreshadowed their strong showing Monday when they shot down a series of Democratic amendments to the measure in strict party-line votes. Democrats boycotted again for an eighth day

Republicans handily outnumber Democrats in the House 60-40, but Democrats have just enough members to deny the Republicans the 67 votes needed to achieve a quorum and conduct any business. Bosma began fining boycotting Democrats \$1,000 a day last week, but a Marion County judge has blocked the collection of those fines.

The measure now moves to the Indiana Senate which approved its own right-to-work measure earlier in the week. Gov. Mitch Daniels has campaigned extensively for the bill and said he would sign it into law.

Indiana AFL-CIO President Nancy Guyott said her team is still working on a long-shot bid to kill the measure in the Indiana Senate.

"We're going to do everything in our power, we're only at the halfway point," Guyott said after the House vote.

Teamsters President Jim Hoffa, in a statement released shortly after the vote, promised a voter backlash like those seen in other Midwest states

"I have little doubt in my mind that Gov. Daniels and Indiana's Republican members of the state House and Senate will

have seen this past year, it's that working men and women will rise up to challenge any legislation that threatens the welfare of their families."