



Alaska GOP lawmaker seeks to curb collective bargaining rights

(CNN) -- The growing push to restrict the collective bargaining rights of government employees has reached the far-flung state of Alaska.

There, a Republican state lawmaker has introduced legislation that would strip many public employees of the right to collectively bargain for hours, benefits and working conditions. State employees could still collectively bargain for wages under the legislation.

The bill exempts firefighters, police officers and emergency medical technicians, who, according to Title 40 of the Alaska Statutes, are prohibited from going on strike.

The bill's sponsor, state Rep. Carl Gatto, R-Palmer, could not be reached for comment. Neither could members of the Republican House leadership. A woman who answered the phone listed for Gatto's Wasilla office said the lawmaker would be unavailable for comment Monday.

Gatto has told various news outlets that his bill mimics legislation that was passed by the Wisconsin Legislature earlier this month, signed into law and is now the subject of a lawsuit in that state. Gatto has said, like the Wisconsin measure, his proposal aims to curb state costs.

Similar bills to limit collective bargaining rights also are pending in Ohio and Indiana.

Opponents of the bill give the measure little chance of passing this session. That's because the 2011 session of the Alaska Legislature is roughly two-thirds over, they said.

Also, opponents said, Alaska lawmakers have been focused on controversial legislation to roll back the state's oil and gas tax on profits earned by petroleum companies in the state.

House minority leader Beth Kerttula, D-Juneau, said Gatto's bill "would be a particularly onerous thing to drop on state employees."

Kerttula said public employees are still smarting from a 2005 overhaul of the state's retirement, pension and health care system. Kerttula called the switch "a disaster" in a state that has a difficult time retaining qualified teachers and police officers.

Kerttula also said the bill would face tough sledding in the state Senate, where unlike the GOP-controlled House, the balance of power between Republicans and Democrats is evenly divided. Kerttula, nevertheless, said the Democratic minority leadership is taking the bill seriously.

State Rep. Berta Gardner, D-Anchorage, who is the House minority whip, wondered whether the proposed collective bargaining bill for Alaska public employees could spark as fierce an argument as Wisconsin's, which prompted 14 Democrats to leave the state in an unsuccessful effort to kill that bill.

"If the Democrats flee here," Gardner said, "we'll have to go to Canada."

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