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## Michigan's Leaders Back Right-to-Work Law

By MATTHEW DOLAN And KRIS MAHER

Michigan's governor and top legislative leaders declared their joint support on Thursday for right-to-work legislation that would ban contracts requiring all employees to pay union dues.

Bills are expected to be introduced Thursday in the Michigan Senate and House with supporters predicting swift passage in a lame-duck legislative session by the end of the year. The GOP has a majority in both chambers.

Hundreds of opponents gathered at the state Capitol in Lansing in protest. It was expected to be the beginning of a fierce fight between labor and business interests over the future of union rights in the birthplace of the powerful United Auto Workers union.

Michigan State Police closed the Capitol building midday to new visitors after protesters attempted to rush onto one of the chamber floors, according to a spokeswoman. In the process, some of the protesters were pepper-sprayed, and eight people were arrested as of 1 p.m., police said.

"The Capitol is in lockdown mode, with people only being allowed to exit," said state police spokeswoman Shanon Banner. Those inside the building were allowed to remain, she said.

She said state police closed the building to additional members of the public because troopers had concerns about overcrowding on some floors.

The passage of right-to-work legislation in Michigan would be the latest blow to organized labor across the Midwest. Earlier this year, Indiana passed similar right-to-work legislation, and unions failed to recall Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker after he pushed through restrictions on public-employee union rights last year. Both fights prompted Democrats to flee the states for a time in an effort to block the legislation. And voters in Michigan rejected a ballot proposal that would have enshrined collective-bargaining rights in the state constitution.

Supporters of right-to-work laws cheered the breakthrough in Michigan.

"Right-to-work is a big sign that Michigan is open for business," said Vincent Vernuccio, director of labor policy at the conservative Mackinac Center.

He noted that while labor had been unable to persuade voters to back its agenda in Michigan and Wisconsin, both states supported the re-election of President Barack Obama and other Democratic candidates. "You're seeing a sea change in



AP

**Union workers hold up signs during a rally outside the State Capitol in Lansing, Mich., on Thursday, as Senate Republicans introduced right-to-work legislation in the waning days of the session.**

the country that these votes that are going Democratic are also not rubber-stamping the union issues," Mr. Vernuccio said.

Republicans in Michigan framed the legislation as a bid to improve fairness and equity for workers who may or may not want to pay to join a union. Labor leaders called the legislation an affront to unions, which would still be responsible for representing the interests of all workers, whether they pay union dues or not.

"I don't view this as something against the unions. It has nothing to do with collective bargaining," Republican Gov. Rick Snyder said at a morning news conference.

Michigan Democrats strongly oppose the legislation and said the issue could interfere with other legislative priorities.

"So-called right-to-work legislation is so divisive and so toxic to the atmosphere at the state capitol and throughout the state that it's going to make it very challenging for the parties to work together in a constructive way to address very real problems," said House Democratic Leader Tim Greimel. "It's a huge distraction from far more pressing issues than we should be addressing."

Under the proposed law, there is an exception for police and firefighters. Gov. Snyder said Thursday that the exception was due to the special circumstances of public-safety workers whose jobs needed protection from labor strife.

Mr. Greimel said, however, that those carve-outs benefit unions that typically back Republicans over Democrats. "That makes it very clear that this is not about sound economic policy. It's motivated by a desire to punish supporters of the

Democratic Party,” he said.

The long-term effect of states becoming right to work still remain to be seen. Many right-to-work states in the South had traditionally been places with little unionization. The industrial Midwest has generally rebuffed similar efforts.

But experts say the legislation in Michigan is likely to weaken the power and financial resources of organized labor to some degree, especially in workplaces without a strong union culture.

“It doesn’t mean that all of the unionized workplaces become nonunion. But it does mean that unions have to do their representation with less resources,” said Richard Hurd, professor of industrial and labor relations at Cornell University.

Until this week, Mr. Snyder had called the issue divisive and inappropriate to consider during the state’s fragile economic recovery. After

discussions with business and labor leaders and prompted by the most conservative wing of the state’s GOP, the governor said he now believes that right-to-work legislation will make Michigan more competitive in attracting new business and additional jobs to the state.

He also cited the influence of Indiana, which became a right-to-work state earlier this year.

Michigan would also stand in contrast to Ohio, where unions were able to turn back a Republican-supported measure in 2011 that would have eliminated most public employees’ collective-bargaining rights. In that case, unions overturned the law through a ballot referendum.

By contrast, voters in Michigan rejected a union-backed measure in November known as Proposal 2 that would have amended the state constitution to protect collective-bargaining rights and acted as a firewall against future right-to-work laws.