

By Capital News Service
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WASHINGTON — Led by Democrats from Maryland’s congressional delegation, hundreds of riled federal workers from across the nation rallied Wednesday on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol in support of public employees’ unions.

“You need to work it out; we don’t want a lockout,” chanted the crowd of National Treasury Employees Union members. The union represents about 150,000 federal agency workers.

The NTEU is meeting in Washington this week and arranging talks with members of Congress to urge them to work to prevent a government shutdown and remove collective bargaining from the national and state budget dialogue.

“Somehow we [government employees] have been demonized in the budget battle,” said Bethesda resident Martha Solt, who works for the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. “We’re not the enemy, we’re supporting the public.”

Congress passed a two-week continuing resolution Wednesday to keep the federal government running until mid-March.

But that temporary solution will not stop some politicians from using federal and state budget cuts as a wedge to divide public employees from collective bargaining, said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md.

Nor should the recent assault on public employees’ collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin and other states be seen as a surprise, following the 20-year decline of private workers’ unions, said Rep. Donna Edwards, D-Md.

Over the last month, Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, has been fighting with that state's Democratic caucus over state employees' ability to negotiate as a group. Originally presented as a budget-cutting measure, Walker's proposal has been criticized by Democrats as nothing more than an attempt to weaken public employee unions.

"I'm tired of you [public workers] being a scapegoat," said Democratic Sen. Ben Cardin.

Wednesday's rally was intended to show solidarity for Wisconsin's public employees.

"We're here to let people know that we are a voice," said Valerie Ginyard of Upper Marlboro, who works as a regulatory scientist for the Food and Drug Administration in Silver Spring. "We're the real people behind the cuts and things that they propose. They need to understand that."

Ginyard was pleased that several members of Maryland's congressional delegation spoke at the hour-long rally. But she wished other states' delegates were as vocal in their support of public workers' unions.

Baltimore resident and NTEU member Anthony W. Lee agreed.

"I think sometimes Congress forgets that it's not only the private sector who have a lot of people who are suffering, living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to get by," said Lee, a compliance officer with the Center for Tobacco Products in Rockville.

"We have a lot of people ... who are just as concerned about a government shutdown and losing their pay as anyone else would be," Lee said.

Lee and Ginyard are meeting with Maryland's members of Congress this week to discuss union rights. NTEU members have planned visits with most of the Maryland delegation, including the state's two Republican representatives, Roscoe Bartlett and Andy Harris, Ginyard said.

Maryland Reps. Chris Van Hollen and John P. Sarbanes also spoke at the rally. The only congressional speakers not from Maryland were Virginia's Rep. Jim Moran and Washington, D.C.'s delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton. Both are Democrats.