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Recall effort against Wisconsin Gov. Walker begins

By SCOTT BAUER

MADISON, Wis. — Jubilant opponents of Republican Gov. Scott Walker launched their effort Tuesday to try to recall him from office, starting a 60-day blitz to gather more than half a million signatures to force an election next year.

The drive to collect an average of 9,000 signatures a day, fueled by anger over Walker's successful push to take away nearly all public worker collective bargaining rights, began with pajama parties and other events after midnight. Daytime activities included rallies, neighborhood canvasses and booths set up around the state Capitol.

There was even a signing event scheduled for Tuesday afternoon outside of Walker's personal home, where his two teenage sons live, in a Milwaukee suburb. Walker bristled at how personal the recall had become.

"You see a total disregard for people's families and others here," Walker said Tuesday on WTMJ-AM in Milwaukee. "I do think that's crossing the line and I think most people in Wisconsin would agree with that, no matter where they're at in the spectrum."

Talk of a recall began almost immediately after Walker released his proposal in February taking away nearly all collective bargaining rights for most public workers and forcing them to pay more for their pensions and benefits.

The measure, which passed in March and took effect this summer, motivated massive protests that grew as large as 100,000 and led all 14 Democratic state senators to flee to Illinois for three weeks in an effort to prevent it from being voted on.

The law took away most public employees' unions power to negotiate anything other than wage increases no greater than inflation. Most police and firefighters were exempted. A similar Ohio law, which did include police and firefighters, was rejected by voters last week. But Wisconsin doesn't allow for a referendum challenging its law to be put on the ballot, so opponents turned to the recall process.

"Let me sign! Let me sign!" said Carla Koykkari of Madison when a circulator knocked on her door Tuesday morning. "You have made my day."

William Jutz of Delavan, Wis., was riding his bike in a Madison neighborhood when he saw a petition circulator and pulled over to sign.

"I made sure to mark it on my calendar so I wouldn't forget," he said.

Frustration and anger at Walker built up for months and could finally come out through the signing of the recall petitions, said Kerrie Louis of Madison, who signed a petition a few blocks from the Capitol.

"No one wants to wait three years," she said. "It couldn't come soon enough."

A new poll released Tuesday indicated more trouble for Walker, with 58 percent saying they would support recalling him from office, up from 47 percent in the spring. A breakdown of the findings in the Wisconsin Public Radio/St. Norbert College Survey show that the increase in support for recalling him came, surprisingly, from Republicans. His disapproval ratings also increased among Republicans.

While chants of “Recall Walker!” were common during the protests, under state law he’s not eligible for that until he’s logged one year in office in January. The recall petitions can be taken out 60 days earlier, and Democrats chose to start it on Tuesday, 11 days after the earliest they could have begun.

The largest recall drive was designed to oust both Walker and Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch from office. But four other recalls efforts also began Tuesday, targeting four incumbent Republican state senators. Three of those were organized by the Democratic Party. Those target Sens. Pam Galloway of Wausau, Terry Moulton of Chippewa Falls and Van Wanggaard of Racine.

A fourth recall, against Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, was launched by a Fort Atkinson woman.

Each of those need between 19,000 and 23,000 signatures to force an election.

Those efforts come after nine recall votes on state senators — six Republicans and three Democrats — this summer. Two Republicans lost, leaving the GOP with a narrow one-vote majority in the Senate.

While gaining majority control of the Senate would give Democrats the means to block the Republicans’ agenda, the biggest target is Walker.

The governor took to the airwaves Monday night with his first recall campaign ad, arguing that progress is being made nearly a year into his term and the petition drive to remove him from office is misguided.

Walker said Tuesday in Racine, where he was announcing a project that would bring hundreds of jobs to Wisconsin, that he would remain focused on his campaign promise to see 250,000 jobs added in the state during his four-year term.

“We are going to be judged by that, whether it’s judged in 2012 or 2014 we’re not going to take our eye off that focus,” Walker said. “To me the campaign is not any different than the campaign we’re on in terms of jobs issues.”

As ground was broken on the expansion for Ruud Lighting, a few dozen protesters chanted “Recall Walker!”

Gathering more than 540,000 signatures in just 60 days may not be that difficult for recall organizers given the number of groups involved and the amount of money that will pour in to support it, said Joshua Spivak, a recall expert and senior fellow at Wagner College in New York.

Governors have been recalled from office only twice in U.S. history, in North Dakota in 1921 and in California when voters removed Gov. Gray Davis from office in 2003.

Democrats have not yet announced a candidate to take on Walker should enough signatures be collected to force an election. The earliest such an election could occur, without any expected delays in verifying the signatures or legal challenges, is March 27. Most expect any election would be later in the spring or in the summer.

Associated Press writer Carrie Antlfinger in Racine, Wis., contributed to this report.