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Sen. Risser outraged that Capitol has become an "armed fortress"

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Sen. Risser outraged that Capitol has become an "armed fortress"

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State Sen. Fred Risser speaks to The Capital Times at a hotel in northern Illinois on Feb. 26. Mike DeVries/The Capital Times

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Fred Risser, the senior member of the Wisconsin Legislature and the longest serving state legislator in the nation, has denounced Gov. Scott Walker and his aides for limiting access to the state Capitol to the people of the state his family has served for four generations.

Risser's great-grandfather served in the Legislature in the 1860s as a Unionist, his grandfather served as a Republican, his father served as a Progressive in the state Capitol of Wisconsin. Risser himself was first elected to the state Assembly in 1956 and to the state Senate in 1962.

Calm and distinguished, the 83-year-old Risser is not one to get angry. But he has always been passionate, as a lawyer and legislator, about civil rights and civil liberties. And the senator's deep discomfort was evident in a statement issued Thursday morning after it became clear that the Capitol was still essentially closed to the citizens of the state despite a judge's order Tuesday that it be opened.

Risser, a Madison senator who has been in Illinois with other Democratic colleagues who are attempting to force the governor to reconsider an attempt to strip public employee unions of bargaining rights and radically restructure state government in other ways, has this to say:

"The Wisconsin State Capitol is, and has always been, the people's building. It should not be treated like an armed fortress. I continue to commend the thousands of Wisconsin residents who have exercised their right of assembly for the past three weeks for the peaceful manner in which they have spoken. I expect that the demonstrators will continue to be respectful of the building and its occupants."

The senior senator added that: "I am outraged at the unnecessary limitations being placed on those who want to visit their elected representatives in the Legislature and participate in the democratic process. There have been no incidents which would warrant limiting entry to the State Capitol. My only thought is that it is the reaction of a paranoid administration trying to limit the voice of the people."

Risser's statement comes one day after one of the state's most senior political figures, former U.S. House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey, was turned away from the Capitol where he began his career as a state representative.

Obey said on Wednesday that he was denied entry to the Capitol for the first time in his five decades of visiting and serving in Madison.

"I think the governor is a political bully and a political thug," said Obey, who urged the governor to stop locking citizens -- and in some cases legislators -- out of the building and begin negotiating with the 14 Democratic senators who fled to Illinois when it became evident that the governor and his legislative allies were seeking to limit debate on what the Democrats see as a union-busting bill.

"I think the governor has needlessly divided the state," said Obey. "I can't think of a bill that will do more to weaken the future of Wisconsin. This is an anti-education, anti-union budget, and people ought to understand that."

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