

# Bill Kaplan: Will Johnson stand-up for retirees?

Posted on Monday, Aug 19, 2019

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A politician is defined by promises to voters. In 2016, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson made three pledges to state voters (Baraboo News Republic): Johnson said he would not run for a third term if reelected (since backpedaled); emphasized that he was running on “retirement security” and declared he would “move bipartisan bills”. The time has come.

Johnson has indicated sympathy for Wisconsin retirees covered by troubled multiemployer pension funds, including the Central States Pension Fund. “The situation has been brewing since the 2008 financial crisis, as investments plummeted, leaving many plans in the red. The slow economic recovery and recent stock market rally (2017-2018) have not been sufficient to reinvigorate the plans, which are jointly funded by labor unions and employers ...” (New York Times).

The Washington Post reported: “There are more than 1 million Americans (includes 25,000 Wisconsinites) who participate in severely distressed multiemployer pensions and another 9 million who are in healthier programs that could be affected by changes”. Johnson has spoken with state retirees, tweeted, issued a letter and press release. He said: “I’ve met with and heard from many of my constituents who are deeply concerned about the dismal state of the multiemployer pension system... . They’re asking for a transparent process and a fair outcome”. A solution is now on the table.

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A few weeks ago, the Democratic-led House passed the bipartisan Butch Lewis Act.

All Wisconsin Democratic representatives voted for the bill, as did 29 GOP representatives, including Wisconsin firebrand Sean Duffy. The pension protection legislation is named in honor of Butch Lewis, a Vietnam War veteran and Ohio Teamster, who worked to save pension coverage for retirees before his untimely death. “The measure would help pension plans sponsored by several employers and managed by a collective bargaining agreement by giving (low-cost loans) to insolvent plans (to make investments that are not risky) so they can continue to distribute the promised retirement benefits” (Washington Post).

New York GOP Representative Peter King tweeted: “As lead Republican sponsor of the Butch Lewis Act (H.R.397) to protect multiemployer pension funds I was proud to speak in support of this legislation in support of working men and women ... . Solid victory for America’s middle income families.” Unlike Duffy, the other Wisconsin GOP representatives voted no. Most perplexing: Green Bay GOP Representative Mike Gallagher’s supporting Trump’s buying Greenland, but declining to help Wisconsin retirees.

However, Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin is a lead sponsor, with 28 other senators, of S.2254 – Butch Lewis Act of 2019. Baldwin said: “Now that the Butch Lewis Act has cleared the House with bipartisan support, Mitch McConnell (GOP Senate Majority Leader) should immediately bring it up for a vote in the Senate so we can get the job done protecting the pensions that these workers and retirees have earned.” And, Kenny Stribling, Co-Chair, Milwaukee Committee to Protect Pensions, pleaded: “This is not a partisan issue. This is an issue of fairness... .”

Senator Johnson must stand-up for retirees and support the Butch Lewis Act.

*– Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.*