

# Bill Kaplan: GOP-led U.S. Senate refuses to act

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The U.S., including Wisconsin, is facing a twin catastrophe: an out-of-control COVID-19 pandemic and a cataclysmic economic meltdown. Public health efforts – masks, social distancing and contact tracing – have been undermined nationally by Trump and by Wisconsin GOP legislators. However, Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers has not given up. He joined GOP-led Indiana and Ohio in issuing a statewide mask mandate. Why?

More than 4.6 million COVID-19 cases nationally, over 54,000 in Wisconsin. U.S. deaths are about 155,000, approaching 1,000 in Wisconsin. Sun Belt states are setting one-day death records. Moreover, COVID-19 is spreading widely to rural areas, including Iron County, Wisconsin which has no hospital. Currently, almost all 72 Wisconsin counties have high COVID-19 activity.

A surging COVID-19 is crippling the economy and stymieing a recovery. “The U.S. economy shrank by a stunning 9.5 percent from April through June, a historic contraction ...” (Washington Post-WP). Moreover, new claims for unemployment benefits totaled over a million for the 19th straight week. Yet the U.S. Senate refuses to act as over 30 million Americans, including hundreds of thousands of Wisconsinites, have lost \$600 weekly federal jobless benefits. A delusional Trump said: “I think the recovery has been very strong. We’ve set record job numbers.” And, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson, 7th-wealthiest U.S. senator, supported cutting the benefits to a paltry weekly \$200!

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Back in May the Democratic-led House saw the coming train wreck and passed relief and recovery legislation. All Wisconsin Democratic representatives voted yes, while state GOP representatives were opposed. The bill would help struggling state, local and tribal governments facing huge budget deficits due to declining revenues and increasing COVID-19 costs. The bipartisan National Governors Association said: “(W)ithout federal revenue replacement, state and local governments would need to cut more than \$500 billion ... eliminating more than 3 million jobs.” The bill also extended federal jobless benefits, funded education, food assistance, health and housing needs.

However, for months the GOP-led Senate did nothing. At the 11th hour the Senate finally rolled out a response – a glaring contrast to the House bill. Republicans have proposed billions for new military weapons, despite U.S. defense spending already accounting for about 60 percent of federal discretionary spending. Almost nothing for the millions going without enough food, but “boosts the ‘three-martini-lunch’ (tax) break, not food stamps” (WP). Then there is the easing of capital requirements for big banks, put in place to reduce their risky behavior. Help for Wall Street not Main Street.

Reminiscent of expanding the pass-through tax break in the March COVID-19 relief bill, inserted by Senate Republicans. What role did Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson play? He is the leading advocate of this tax break for the wealthy (70 percent of pass-through income goes to the top 1 percent). Finally, the Senate bill does little for millions of Americans who can’t pay their rent or mortgages. Shame.

As talks continued between Democratic congressional leaders and the Trump administration, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell adjourned the Senate and went home to Kentucky. Pathetic.

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