

Bill Kaplan: Baldwin stands-up for retirees

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Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin played a central role in drafting the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to partially fund retirement benefits of participants in imminently collapsing pension plans. Baldwin said: “There are about 22,500 workers and retirees in Wisconsin (over a million nationally) who were facing massive cuts to their pensions, through no fault of their own. There are also more than 100 employers in the state that were on the hook for a pension liability they may not have been able to afford. I worked for six years with Wisconsin workers and retirees to make sure they would get the pensions that they worked for and earned, and finally we were able to get this done in the American Rescue Plan.”

Baldwin was not alone. In 2019, the Democratic-led House, including 29 GOP representatives, tried to fix the pension problem with federal aid. All Wisconsin Democratic representatives and then GOP Representative Sean Duffy voted yes. The other Wisconsin GOP representatives were opposed. However, then Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell refused to allow a Senate vote. Baldwin tweeted: “Now that (the bill) passed the House (McConnell) needs to bring up these reforms for a vote”

Baldwin spearheaded a Senate pension bill with nearly 40 cosponsors. But McConnell still said no. The pensions plans continued to deteriorate. The pandemic and resultant economic downturn exacerbated the problem. Former GOP House Speaker John Boehner astutely said: “Essential workers (dairy-food processing, delivery, grocery and warehouse) need their pensions saved.” Moreover, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce said: “Millions of workers rely on multiemployer pension plans for their retirement security, but because of a confluence of events (2008-09 Great Recession, deregulation, decreased employer participation and now COVID-19) ... their plans are on the brink of insolvency. ... Without a resolution to this crisis, billions of dollars in retirement benefits will be lost, which would not only severely harm current retirees, but also would inevitably hurt employees,

employers, their communities, and the overall economy.”

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Conservative American Enterprise Institute economist Alex Brill estimated the collapse of just one plan (the Central States Pension Fund) would cost Wisconsin: over \$206 million in pension income, over \$20 million in state-local taxes and over \$57 million in federal taxes. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce said: the pension provisions in the ARP were “better than nothing, and nothing was where we were headed.”

Retirees refused to accept the impending disaster. And, the Milwaukee-SE Committee to Protect Pensions played a leading role. Bob Amsden, retired truck driver, said: “We worked hard. We contributed our money - our hard earned dollars for our deferred retirement savings.” Amsden is a brilliant, passionate and persistent organizer. The grassroots movement he and others organized was essential to fixing the pension problem. He said: “We just carried this to the end. It was very emotional, hard fought. We gave up our lives.”

Amsden emphasized that Senator Tammy Baldwin stood-up for retirees consistently and relentlessly while Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson listened, made polite noises and shamefully did nothing.

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