



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on March 8, 2011

AWOL Wisconsin Senators Could Return Soon

After spending more than three weeks in Illinois seeking to block a Republican reform bill aimed at reining in a multi-billion dollar deficit and the powerful government-sector unions, at least some of Wisconsin's 14 missing Democratic state Senators could be preparing to return to Madison, according to news reports.

GOP leaders have [tried](#) just about everything to get the Democrat senators back to the Capitol. They levied \$100 per day fines, refused to deposit their pay checks directly in the bank, held them in contempt of the Senate, and even authorized law enforcement to bring them back to work by force if necessary. But nothing worked. And until at least 20 Senators are present to form a quorum — Republicans have 19 — no votes on fiscal issues can take place.



Egged on by a nationwide coalition of leftist groups and union bosses who pour big money into their campaign coffers, the runaway lawmakers kept insisting that they would not return until Gov. Scott Walker and Republican legislators were willing to “compromise” on the budget-repair bill. The Governor repeatedly said he was willing to discuss the issues, but that cutting spending and curtailing government-union powers was essential to solving the state's budget crisis, not to mention the fiscal problems of local governments.

But finally, after weeks of heated protests and negotiations, the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) on March 7 that the missing Democrats were preparing to head home — eventually. Apparently the anti-reform lawmakers believe the bill will hurt Republicans when it passes due to its alleged unpopularity. Or so they claim.

When exactly the Democrats will return from their trip to Illinois is still unclear. One of the state Senators who spoke to the paper said that certain matters, such as the contempt finding that orders police to detain the runaway lawmakers, needed to be resolved first.

Earlier this week, Democrats [sent a letter](#) to Gov. Walker and the GOP leadership requesting a meeting near the state border, presumably to avoid being detained and forced to return to Madison. “The people of Wisconsin are overwhelmingly supportive of us reaching a bipartisan, negotiated compromise,” the letter claimed. “Senate Democrats stand ready to do just that[;] we ask that you do the same.”

Walker [responded](#) by calling the border-meeting proposal “ridiculous.” He said numerous meetings between the missing Democrats and his staff and senior Republican lawmakers had already taken place, and that Democrats were the ones preventing progress. Layoffs of more than 10,000 state employees could be just around the corner if the legislators don't return and allow the bill to pass, Walker [said](#).



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In a response to the Democrats' letter, GOP Senate leadership said it was the Democrats' own fault that compromise was no longer possible. "As you know, your opportunity to compromise and amend the bill was on the floor of the state Senate," Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald [wrote](#) in the response letter. "As you know, you forfeited that right and opportunity when you decided to flee the state instead of doing your job."

So, after more than three weeks, numerous lawmakers in Illinois seemed to be giving up the fight, at least temporarily. "I think we have to realize that there's only so much we can do as a group to make a stand," Democrat Sen. Bob Jauch [told](#) the *Journal*. "It's really up to the public to be engaged in carrying the torch on this issue." One of the Democratic state Senators is also seven-months pregnant, complicating matters even more.

Gov. Walker also noted that some Senators had already promised to return as early as last week, but that Democratic Sen. Mark Miller (photo, above) had been preventing them from doing so while misleading the public.

"For the last several weeks both Sen. Fitzgerald and my administration have been reaching out to reasonable senators, many of whom are very interested and willing to come back to the state of Wisconsin, and time and time again the person standing in the way of making that possible is Sen. Mark Miller," Walker [said](#), [claiming](#) Miller was "misleading the public, just like he misled us, and apparently seems to be misleading members of his own caucus."

Democrats [said](#) the Governor's statements were simply meant to create a lack of unity among them.

As for Democrat claims that passing the bill would hurt the GOP's popularity among voters; Republicans weren't buying it. "If you think this is a bad bill for Republicans, why didn't you stand up in the chamber and debate us about it three weeks ago?" [wondered](#) Senate Majority Leader Fitzgerald. "People think it's absolutely ridiculous that these 14 senators have not been in Wisconsin for three weeks."

The state Assembly [already passed the bill](#) despite Democrat protestations. And it will almost surely pass in the Senate, too, assuming at least one of the AWOL lawmakers actually returns, making a quorum possible.

Recall efforts against every single eligible state Senator — eight Republicans and eight Democrats — are [already underway](#). And analysts and party bosses predict that at least some of the campaigns could succeed.

The reform bill and the [weeks of protests](#) have [attracted national attention](#) and money as the [consequences](#) became [obvious](#). If and when Gov. Walker and Republicans succeed, other state governments facing fiscal problems could pursue similar efforts. However, if they fail, taxpayers across the nation could remain in the grip of government [unions](#) for the foreseeable future.

Photo: Democratic Sen. Mark Miller

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