

Transcript of Rep. Gordon Hintz floor speech on adoption of AA1 to special session SB1

February 23, 2021, from 1:13pm - 1:23pm, with time stamps included throughout for reference

Can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/BszqIFwrRPI>

[0:00] Good afternoon everyone. February 23rd, 2021. Coming up on a ... it's hard, even hard to imagine what we were all doing a year ago. And, well, the half full side of me says you know we're finally acting on some things that are positive, that are needed.

[0:24] The question that I have for all of you is what is the Assembly doing today that it could not have done weeks ago, or months ago? And continually, why has there been so little urgency over the past year? I mean, it's been clear for some time that the challenges related to COVID would exist far longer than the Republicans anticipated. Remember some of those good bipartisan measures of last April expired 35, 40 days later with the emergency measure. Some later in the summer. Many others at the end of the year. But it was clear that the challenges facing the public were going to need some of those things to be able to help our healthcare providers. To be able to help individuals and small businesses.

[1:14] It is also clear that convening the Assembly during COVID has not been an obstacle for your leadership. Yet here we are, February 23rd, 2021. We know that the Senate wouldn't come back despite the fact that there was a lot of bills. But, given that we're all here, in person, we still don't have a mask requirement, there's a lot of hearings with no masks required. Yet, we're, during a dangerous part of the pandemic, there's no reason that we couldn't have met over the past year.

[1:47] So, why so long to address unemployment insurance, that we know has been a challenge? Not our challenge, right, because we have jobs. Right? Maybe some of the urgency that is lacking is because of the empathy that is lacking. Yet I know that all of you have received calls. And I know that it's gut-wrenching. And I know that it's the hardest part of our job. But why so long?

[2:11] All we have heard for the past year is that it's Governor Evers' problem. Has it really all been for political reasons? That if we acted to do something to address past bad decisions, to suspend rules that are obstacles. That it would somehow become less of a political issue? You know what people hate about politics is when they choose to be political on issues that really matter.

[2:44] If you remember my comments not just last April but this year have been about the fact that the last thing we should be politicizing is our pandemic response. That the best thing that all of us can do is the right thing and to act with urgency and to live to fight another day on other issues.

[3:00] I think part of the problem is the more we learn that every little obstacle to address unemployment insurance is actually - we know, not just the system that we're going to get going forward today, that we know has been like this for a decade - but the fact that there are

numerous obstacles in place, numerous obstacles that many in this room on your side made possible.

[3:26] The one-week waiting period that is very popular to repeal, and repeal again - we're doing it - was something that was passed in 2011 when Governor Walker signed the measure. Remember when you guys decided to wait to repeal it last April, \$25 million dollars that I think I wish we still had.

[3:51] But it wasn't just 2011. 2012 - Republicans here approved a law that prevented claimants from receiving benefits if they didn't search for work. Again, something that we could have suspended. Something that we could have repealed. Something that is an obstacle for someone who has never been unemployed before but has found themselves in this position.

[4:13] But hold on, it wouldn't be a session during the eight year reign of Governor Walker without expanding the work-search requirement further, and establishing more instances in which benefits could be cut off. Because where now, y'know, the unemployed through COVID are humanized a little bit. They weren't over the past eight, well, between 2010 and 2018.

[4:45] Hold on! 2015. Republicans increased the number of situations in which someone can be denied benefits for refusing a job offer.

[4:57] And then of course in 2018, before Governor Evers was even sworn in, there was the decision to undermine his ability and limit his power in many ways restricting the ability to waive many criteria for receiving benefits. Which, if you were the executive, in charge with managing the public health response to the pandemic would be something that would be really helpful.

[5:22] So, on the one hand, I hear you guys saying, "Governor Evers already has the power, he can do all this." But we remember in 2018, that it was about limiting that power.

[5:35] And so here we are almost ten months after we met in that almost unanimous bipartisan COVID package, with Democrats urgently asking the legislature to meet again, to do more, to extend some of the things that we did, because it mattered. And I think part of it was you didn't want to face these things.

[6:00] Last July, Assembly Democrats introduced urgent legislation to address UI because we were already four months into hearing from people and we knew while there was a system was overwhelmed and we knew we weren't going to be able to fix the technology system, we knew that the case by case basis and the barriers that were there were many of the very things that you all thought was great over eight years.

[6:26] The very obstacles that you put into place we met to suspend, we introduced bills to address.

[6:40] So, we, in those bills, we expanded the Department of Workforce Development's authority to promulgate rules and provide waivers for work search and job registration requirements, knowing that those measures that you put in were now working against us. We had bills that eliminated the requirement that claimants wait one week before receiving benefits, knowing that we were going to go beyond, that, that the economic impact of the pandemic was going to go longer than the actual health risk. And we reduced the work searches from four to two per, per week and repealed the provi-, provision allowing DWD to require by rule additional work searches.

[7:29] We had a bill that would eliminate the concept of substantial fault being a disqualifying factor. These were all things that were put into place over the eight years when you also did not do anything to improve unemployment insurance. Where you also ignored the requests for a system upgrade that was fifty years old.

[7:54] Yet February 23rd, 2021, we're doing again the minimum. And I'll remind you that there are still twelve something bills out there that you agree on, that we agree on, that the governor agrees on, that the Senate agrees on, that we're not bringing to the floor, that would benefit somebody, that would help somebody, that would help health care providers, that would help people, that would help employers.

[8:23] And so you guys can try to spin this and try to play politics with something like unemployment insurance but it's cynical and it's contrary to what we're here to do today.

[8:35] And I hope you will remember the fact, maybe some of you did want to meet over the last year. Maybe some of you did say last July, "Hey I saw those unemployment bills. Maybe we should suspend some of those ideas that aren't aging very well right now, that have made it harder." And today, I think you will have that opportunity to reconsider things. Let's not do the minimum. And let's also not just not do this. Let's get back to the things that we already know that we agree on, not continue to play games back and forth. I appreciate that we're meeting more often, more often than last session at its current pace, but we need to have some urgency. We need to de-politicize the pandemic and we need to be honest. You need to be honest with yourselves about what the obstacles to UI have been and quit trying to create a fake unemployment insurance crisis because of your guilt over all the things that you did over eight years. So, thank you.