



1968
Tom begins work as a social worker, and is elected president of his Contra Costa County Union Chapter, SEIU Local 535

.....**1967**
Tom begins work for Union Ice Company.

TOM RANKIN **(A MAN WITH A KNACK FOR) QUIETLY MAKING HISTORY**

Tom Rankin, president emeritus of the California Labor Federation, graduated first in his class from Northfield High School in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1959. He went on to study philosophy at Carleton College, where his father, who died in 1953, had taught for many years. Tom's mother, to whom he credits his work ethic and concern for the underdog, was a registered nurse. During summer breaks from college he worked on the campus maintenance crew. In 1963, Tom traveled to Germany as a Fulbright fellow at the University of Freiburg. He stayed on for another year to teach English at a German high school and to study at the Freie Universität in Berlin. He learned a lot about politics from his Marxist roommate, who had a knack for stirring up trouble. They shared a coldwater flat near the Berlin Wall. Tom remembers rescuing his roommate during a bar fight with a local tough who didn't take kindly to his political views. He also remembers coming to understand how far Europe was ahead of the United States when it came to social policies. He brought a few ideas home with him.

In 1965 Tom came to UC Berkeley to work on a master's degree in European History. In 1966, he got a job as a teaching assistant in the History Department, and got active in the American Federation of Teachers, which at the time was organizing the teaching assistants. His first strike was over a student safety issue while massive anti-Vietnam war protests were going on at the Berkeley campus. "Cops off campus" was the demand. He remembers the importance of the support provided by the Alameda County Central Labor Council. In 1967, Tom got his master's degree, signed a pledge to give up his student deferment, and decided to leave school.

That summer, Tom worked for a union company in Oakland aptly named the Union Ice Company. He helped wrestle 300-pound blocks of ice into a crusher and funnel the crushed ice into paper bags, which were sewn closed by one guy operating a sewing machine at the end of the line. While at the ice plant, Tom got to know the vital importance of meal and rest breaks, an experience that would inform his legislative work some 30 years later. Tom remembers, "I lived for my breaks. I always ate my lunch at morning break and was so cold and tired by lunchtime, I went outside and slept in the sun."

Luckily manufacturing ice was a seasonal industry. Tom got laid off before he even paid dues to the Teamsters. With characteristic humor, Tom says, "I hope they are smarter now and get dues from their summer help."

1979
Higher Education Employee-Employer
Relations Act passed

.....1970
Tom began law school at Boalt Hall.

1976
Tom started a private labor law practice and
represented several trade unions.
Tom and the committee negotiated to limit
and monitor the use of pesticides in the
regional parks.

BY PATRICIA GATES

Tom married Alexis Mekjavich in 1967 as he was facing the draft and drawing unemployment. “Not exactly the perfect time to start a family,” Tom now recognizes. Soon after the wedding he was called back to his hometown to appear before his local draft board. They didn’t pay much attention to his arguments against the war. In January of 1968 he was ordered to report to the Oakland Induction Center for his physical exam. After the exam, he refused to sign the declaration that he was not a member of any group on a long list of “subversive organizations,” claiming his First Amendment right to freedom of association. He also spoke out against the war to a roomful of his fellow potential inductees. Tom was then sent to meet with an intelligence officer who, to his astonishment, turned out to be a kid from Northfield who had been in Tom’s Boy Scout troop. In March of 1968, Tom got a notice stating that he was found “fully acceptable for induction into the armed services.” But for whatever reason – his age or his outspoken opposition to the war – he was never called up. Tom wonders if there might have been some “scouts’ honor” at play.

Tom began work as a social worker in 1968. Influenced by his stay in Germany and by a man he considers a mentor to this day, David Novogrodsky, Tom became active in his union, SEIU Local 535, and was elected president of his Contra Costa County Union Chapter that same year. Taking the opportunity to learn about organizing, unions and community alliances from Novogrodsky, who was director of 535 at that time, Tom began his lifelong commitment to improving the working lives of Californians. His work while a member of Local 535 took him inside people’s homes. He learned firsthand about the value of the social safety net to families who struggled to live on the paltry checks offered by government assistance programs.

These experiences helped prepare Tom for the key role he was to play more than 30 years later when, in 2000, he guided the implementation of Assembly Bill 60 (Knox), the law that reinstated the 40-hour work week and strengthened meal and rest break protections for all California workers.

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Tom was acting director of
AFSCME’s state employee
organizing campaign.
He led a 60-day strike by the East
Bay Parks AFSCME Local 2428.

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Tom went to work as the research director for the California Labor Federation under the leadership of Jack Henning, executive secretary, and Albin Gruhn, president.

1987

Governor Deukmejian defunds Cal-OSHA

.....1988

The Federation, in coalition with environmental, public health and civic groups, got an initiative known as Proposition 97 on the ballot. It passed by a 54% to 46% margin.

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TOM RANKIN
(A MAN WITH A KNACK FOR) QUIETLY MAKING HISTORY

In 1970, after spending a summer traveling in Europe and a year in Minnesota working for the St Paul Department of Human Rights, Tom began law school at Boalt Hall. In 1971, his daughter, Sara, was born. But his marriage did not survive the rigors of these early years. After law school he went to work for a union consulting firm run by Novogrodsky and Charlie Reiter which assisted unions in organizing, bargaining and arbitrations. In 1975, he was acting director of AFSCME's state employee organizing campaign. Much to the chagrin of the International union, he led a 60-day strike by the East Bay Parks AFSCME Local 2428. In 1976 Tom started a private labor law practice and represented several trade unions including Local 2428, his future wife, Jocelyn Real's union. He is particularly proud of the work he did at the time with the Coordinating Committee on Pesticides. Tom and the committee negotiated, as part of the parks' union contract, a joint labor-management Ecology Program to limit and monitor the use of pesticides in the regional parks.

Tom's interest in health and safety was given a boost by by Don Vial, director of the Department of Industrial Relations 1974-1981, whom he knew from Don's work at the UC Berkeley Labor Center. Don recruited Tom to train union representatives on the newly passed Cal-OSHA laws. After the Employee-Employer Relations Act passed in 1978 and the Higher Education Employee-Employer Relations Act passed in 1979, Tom worked with the public employees division of the Laborers' Union on organizing and unit determination.

In 1983 Tom went to work as the research director for the California Labor Federation under the leadership of Jack Henning, executive secretary, and Albin Gruhn, president. From that time forward Tom's work focused on legislation. He will never forget his work on the Federation's long effort to restore the protection of Cal-OSHA, which was defunded by Governor Deukmejian as of January 1, 1987. The Federation, in coalition with environmental, public health and civic groups, got an initiative known as Proposition 97 on the November 1988 ballot. It passed by a 54% to 46% margin. California workers once more had the protection of its state worker safety and health plan.

In 1996 Tom was elected president of the California Labor Federation and served together with Art Pulaski, executive secretary, until his retirement in 2004. He focused on legislation ensuring union rights and protecting wages, hours and working conditions for all California workers.

.....1994

Tom established the Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation, which he chaired from 1994 to 2004.

2009 •

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2007 •

Tom served as interim director of Worksafe

Tom was a key participant in the many legislative efforts to change California's workers' compensation laws from 1983 through 2004. One of his lasting achievements was the establishment of the Commission on Health and Safety and Workers' Compensation, a labor-management agency that does independent research on workers' compensation issues and administers the Worker Occupational Safety and Health Training Program, which Tom chaired from 1994 to 2004. He also served as labor's principal negotiator on other social insurance issues: unemployment insurance, state disability insurance, and paid family leave. He was instrumental in the successful 1996 ballot initiative campaign to increase the minimum wage. During his time at the Federation, 59 health and safety bills sponsored and supported by the Federation were signed into law. Seventy were vetoed and countless bad health and safety bills were defeated due to the Federation's efforts.

Retirement for Tom has meant more time for his family and travel. It has not meant the end of his commitment to unions and working people. He says, "The best thing is no longer being tied to the legislative schedule." Instead he gets great joy being tied to any schedule imposed by his granddaughter, Kamiko, who is now almost two.

In 2009, Tom was appointed as a labor representative to the State Compensation Fund Board of Directors, thus continuing his efforts since 1994 to ensure protections for injured workers. Tom also served as interim director of Worksafe in 2007 and helped maintain that organization through a tough transitional period.

Tom currently serves as treasurer of the California Alliance for Retired Americans, a federation of unions, union retiree groups and community organizations working on issues affecting retirees. He is also on the advisory boards of UC Berkeley's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, and the UC Berkeley Labor Occupation Health Program, and is an active member of the National Academy of Social Insurance.

When asked when he is actually planning to retire, Tom admits, "It's hard to sit by and watch all the things I've worked so hard for being attacked. Partial retirement seems to suit me well for the foreseeable future so long as Jocelyn, Sara and Kamiko all agree."

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