

Tom Balanoff

2005 Peggy Browning Fund Honoree



As president of SEIU's Illinois Council, Tom has presided over five years of unprecedented growth—a doubling of SEIU's Illinois' membership. His leadership has been at its strongest in the very place it was nurtured. For generations, the Chicago South Side Balanoff family has been leading fights for unions, for desegregation, for racial and economic justice. James Balanoff, Sr., Tom's grandfather, was a Bulgarian immigrant who believed that trade unionism was key to transcending American racial and ethnic factionalism. James Balanoff, Jr., Tom's father, was the president of the largest steelworker's local in the country—Local 1010 based in Gary. He later became the director of the steelworkers' District 31.

Tom built on his family's tradition. With a Master's Degree in Labor and Industrial Relations from the University of Illinois, he went on to work for the Fire Fighters and the Allied Industrial Workers' Union, and later with the Cement Workers. Tom's first position with SEIU was as international research director. Within a year, he was promoted to Building Service Division director, where he played a crucial role in the historic Justice for Janitors campaigns across the country.

Tom came back to Chicago in 1994 to become the trustee of Local 73, where he was later elected president. He was elected to the international executive board in 1995, and became an international vice president in 1996. During this time he also brought all SEIU locals into a unified SEIU Illinois State Council. In 1999, he was called to New York City to lead the reorganization of the largest building service local in the country, Local 32 BJ. In 2000, he returned to Chicago, where he was elected president of Local 1.

Tom's leadership transcends his role in SEIU. He is also a bridge builder—forging crucial alliances among religious, community and labor organizations to further a broad range of social justice goals. In the broader labor movement, Tom has led international efforts to raise standards for workers. Today, as the president of the SEIU Illinois Council, he continues to provide leadership to the 165,000-member Illinois SEIU. His tenure has been characterized not only by growth, but also by increased diversity in leadership, expanded political involvement, innovative approaches to organizing and the most successful contract campaigns in the union's Illinois history.