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Four ways of looking at an Aztec Eagle: the contested legacy of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers
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“Sí, se puede.” “Yes, it can be done.” It was 1972, and United Farm Workers (UFW) leader Cesar Chavez was in the fifth day of a fast in Phoenix.¹ He had undertaken the fast in response to the Arizona state government’s passage of a law limiting farm workers’ ability to engage in strikes or boycotts. Republican Governor Jack Williams had made a point of signing the law with unusual speed, and the UFW proposed a drive to recall him. Local allies, however, were convinced that such an effort could not succeed. An argument ensued. Surrounded by voices saying “No,” UFW co-founder Dolores Huerta insisted, “Sí, se puede.” Chavez agreed. At his urging, the words became a mantra for the campaign, and later for the union as a whole. A slogan with uncommon political reach and longevity was born.

The naysayers were right on a narrow point: Williams was not recalled, and the powerful Farm Bureau, which had sponsored the legislation, was not thwarted so swiftly as a storybook version of the tale might demand. Yet the impact of UFW organizing in Arizona would be profound. As Chavez continued to fast, visitors flocked to his bedside. Thousands of farm workers, politicians such as Senator George McGovern, and celebrities including Coretta Scott King and Joan Baez traveled to talk with him or join him in attending an evening mass. Chavez’s face had yellowed, his uric acid level began to escalate, and his heartbeat grew erratic. Concern and media coverage mounted until, after 24 days, Chavez broke his fast in front of 5000 people with a sip of thin vegetable broth.

Amid the wave of publicity provoked by the fast, UFW organizers canvassed door-to-door and tabled in front of stores. In a matter of months they gathered an astonishing 168,000 petition signatures and added many thousands of voters to the state’s rolls. The newly registered voters, a large number of them Navajos and Latinos, soon made their presence felt. By 1974, they spurred a major realignment in the state legislature and pushed Democratic candidate Raul Castro to victory as Arizona’s first Mexican American governor.²

In the years that followed, the UFW would use many of the same elements featured in the Arizona struggle – dogged door-to-door organizing, bold political strategy, the enlistment of mass support, and resolute acts of personal sacrifice – to secure a wider array of improbable victories. And, for its part, “Sí, se puede” would continue to be associated with some remarkable political sights. In early 2006, nearly two-and-a-half decades after the slogan’s debut, millions who turned out in cities across the United States in an unpredicted and unprecedented effort to promote immigration reform chanted “Sí, se puede” as they marched. Even more recently, the
words entered into American presidential lore. In 2008, as his national campaign gained momentum, Illinois Senator Barack Obama adopted an alternate English translation – “Yes We Can!” – as a rallying cry at his public events.

The connection between the future president and the UFW was not merely rhetorical. Marshall Ganz, a UFW organizer from 1965 to 1981 and former member of the organization’s national Executive Board, masterminded the “Camp Obama” training program for grassroots field organizers in the campaign. This and the publication of several books on the union since the 2008 elections (including one by Ganz) have helped to fuel the most significant spike in attention to the organization since Chavez’s death in 1993.

As part of a renewed discussion about the UFW’s legacy, a variety of supportive writers, critical journalists, and union veterans have offered different ways to look at the organization’s history. Some present it as an inspiring, almost mythic story of an underdog succeeding against the odds. A second view sees the union as embodying a cautionary tale about snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. A third perspective holds up the farm workers as an entrepreneurial movement that has seeded subsequent progressive campaigns with innovative tactics and a trove of talented personnel.

As activists who have been a part of social movements in a range of capacities – as participants in mass mobilizations around globalization and immigrant rights issues, as coordinators of boycotts and demonstrations for established labor unions and ad hoc activist groups, and as contributors to debates about movement vision and strategy – we have been excited to see a renewed discussion of the relevance of Cesar Chavez and his movement for today. And yet we believe that those now looking to the UFW for contemporary lessons would benefit from a fourth view. This highlights the union’s success in bringing together different organizing models – in a way that holds tremendous potential yet to be realized by others.

Building with small hands

For generations, migrants toiling in the fields in California and beyond had been among the most exploited laborers in America. Such workers could be seen stooped over in the unrelenting sun, scrambling to eke out survival from poverty-level, piece-rate wages. They were often housed in squalid, employer-controlled shantytowns. And, increasingly over the years, they suffered direct exposure to toxic pesticides. In successive attempts dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, radicals such as the organizers of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and mainstream labor groups alike tried and failed to bring these workers into unions. Each time, challenges such as the transitory nature of the harvest seasons, the use of foreign workers to control the labor market, and the intimidating political power of agribusiness growers – who had judges and local police officers to do their bidding – proved too daunting.

So in 1962, when Cesar Chavez founded what would become the UFW, he could hardly have taken on less favorable odds. The story of a man with little formal education and a growing family to support (Chavez would have eight children) leaving a secure job as a community organizer, turning down a more lucrative job offer as a Peace Corps administrator, and instead setting out on a quixotic mission to build a farm workers movement has enchanted chroniclers ever since. In the 1960s and 1970s it attracted literary figures such as New Yorker writer John Gregory Dunne and Paris Review co-founder Peter Matthiessen, who each wrote a book on the movement. In Why David Sometimes Wins, Ganz’s more recent and less lyrical sociological
book that grew out of his post-UFW doctoral dissertation at Harvard, Chavez’s battle is deemed worthy of extended biblical analogy.

Suffice it to say that the achievements of the farm workers movement between 1965 and 1979 were astounding. At the beginning of that period, Chavez, who enjoyed no outside support from established sponsors, could claim only a few hundred dues-paying members in his organization. He had won no union contracts and had assembled only a small, painstakingly developed cadre of leaders. Yet the end of the federal Bracero Program and the explosion of the Civil Rights Movement into public consciousness created the conditions needed for the future UFW to undertake a daring strategy. Prompted by a fall 1965 strike of workers in the vineyards of Delano, California, the union put forth a demand for recognition, pioneered new forms of roving picket lines, began civil disobedience in the fields, and launched a soon-to-be-famous consumer boycott.

In April 1966, the UFW achieved a first victory when a boycotted grower agreed to a landmark union contract. By then it was clear that the UFW’s red flag and iconic black Aztec eagle represented a civil rights crusade far bigger than any single unionization drive. The movement pushed for greater gains. By 1970, an estimated 17 million Americans were boycotting grapes. The union became a home for hundreds of farm-worker leaders, student activists, and young members of the clergy who agreed to work for $5-per-week stipends, plus room and board.

Using this volunteer army, the union established itself as a political power in California. It rallied decisive Mexican American support for Robert F. Kennedy’s bid in the state’s 1968 presidential primary. It overcame two major waves of counterattack by growers who enlisted the Teamsters in a notorious series of raids and sweetheart contracts. Finally, it secured passage of pivotal statewide legislation in the form of the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act. By 1977 the UFW had negotiated more than 100 contracts of its own, covering between 50,000 and 60,000 workers, who for the first time benefited from agreements for improved wages, mandatory breaks, decent bathrooms and drinking water, and a variety of health and safety protections.

All this made a lasting impact on the American public, especially socially conscious baby boomers. “To this day,” writes author Randy Shaw in Beyond the Fields, another valuable recent addition to the UFW literature, “one virtually never sees Gallo wine,” a long-boycotted brand, “at a progressive event.” The union’s significance for many Chicanos went even deeper, so much so that Chavez assumed larger-than-life proportions. Organizer Fred Ross, Jr. tells of attending a political rally in the summer of 1971 with a group of Oregon farm workers who had never before seen Chavez speak. After the event “one farm worker told me how surprised he was when he first saw Cesar. Because Cesar inspired fear in the growers, the worker imagined him as a giant of a man, dressed in a suit and tie. ‘But he looked just like me,’” the worker said, “‘dressed very simply, and [he] had such small hands!’”

Gambling with a fresh deck

As captivating as the story of the UFW’s rise has proven, the union’s subsequent decline has drawn nearly as much attention in recent discussions of its legacy. A second take on the UFW story – one focusing on the union’s failure to maintain a density of membership – can be found in sources including the highly critical writing of former L.A. Times reporter Miriam Pawel. As it turned out, the union reached an organizational high point in the late 1970s. Many factors contributed to the union’s
decline in the decades that followed. In the Reagan years, it suffered in the nation’s generally anti-union climate and faced a succession of hostile, Republican California governors. As time passed, the civil-rights-era social movement infrastructure and lingering public sympathy that had provided crucial support for earlier farm worker campaigns eroded. And a strong surge in immigration from Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s flooded the agricultural market with unorganized newcomers seeking work in the fields.

Beyond these external factors, Chavez can be faulted for a variety of missteps in deciding what structure and strategy his organization should adopt. Stung by the 2-to-1 defeat of a statewide ballot initiative, Proposition 14, which the union had sponsored in 1976 to guarantee organizers unimpeded access to the fields, Chavez began an internal reorganization of the UFW that prompted the acrimonious departure of even some of his closest lieutenants. These included Ganz, Chavez’s then-heir apparent and now-prominent Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Vice President Eliseo Medina, and the celebrated head of the UFW’s scrappy but tenacious legal team, Jerry Cohen. Committed to maintaining a social movement vision, Chavez resisted many moves to make the UFW a more conventional union. He consolidated and centralized power rather than allowing the creation of independent locals. He opposed moves to professionalize the staff. And he had little tolerance for many who questioned his decisions, accusing them of disloyalty.

The all-consuming nature of organizing with Chavez and the UFW, which generated intense personal feelings, ensures that debate about these actions will rage for years to come. The online Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, founded in 2004 by Leroy Chatfield, a longtime UFW worker who became a prominent operative in California politics, has gathered a remarkable series of personal reflections from ex-staffers about the union’s transitions, as well as a wealth of materials about the UFW more broadly. Chatfield himself, who had left the union long enough before the period of internal strife to possess a distanced assessment, writes that within a few years of the Proposition 14 defeat, “Most key staff members from the era of the Delano grape strike were gone, many boycott volunteers left, the [health] clinics were closed, the legal department disbanded, and some volunteers, including long-termers, were pushed overboard. Cesar Chavez and his movement turned a corner and began anew with a fresh deck of cards from which to deal.”

In hindsight, that deck produced far weaker hands than the UFW had previously played. During the 1980s the union effectively halted its new organizing efforts, began to rely on a sophisticated direct mail operation to raise funds, exerted influence largely through campaign contributions, and, in many of its operations, started to resemble a more ordinary nonprofit service organization. Today, the union remains likely the most significant advocate for farm workers’ rights in California; in recent times it has mounted some courageous campaigns to improve conditions in the fields and to try to win union representation for groups of workers. But its current power can hardly be compared to the formidable political sway and organizing swagger it once possessed. By Ganz’s calculations, its current contracts with growers cover approximately 5000 workers, less than a tenth of its peak membership.

Seeding a progressive future
Yet unless new students of the farm workers movement are to take away only a trite moral about the need to tip all sacred cows, the focus on the UFW’s decline is not
promising for those who wish to find lessons for current politics. Countering with a third perspective on the union’s history, San Francisco-based writer and organizer Randy Shaw rightly argues in *Beyond the Fields* that “the movement’s true legacy … should not be based on the size of the UFW’s current membership rolls.” Instead, he believes, “the legacy should be evaluated by the impact of its ideas and alumni on current social justice struggles.”

Few organizations so effectively served as an incubator for activist talent as the UFW, and certainly no other labor organization in the 1960s so deftly harnessed the energies of wider social movements. Ganz, a student Civil Rights activist before joining Chavez, explains, “While the Peace Corps and the poverty programs were recruiting us, unions were too afraid of communists to talk to us.” Unions, that is, other than the farm workers. The UFW so embraced and inspired fresh enlistingees that “for student volunteers, ‘going to Delano’ became the California version of ‘going to Mississippi.’”

By taking in young activists as $5-per-week volunteers and giving them significant “sink or swim” responsibility, the union allowed the most driven and gifted organizers to distinguish themselves. Shaw documents how many such individuals went on to take leading roles in Central American solidarity campaigns, community organizing drives, public interest legal practices, and community-clergy coalitions – not to mention in some of today’s most dynamic labor unions.

Shaw is also right to note that, beyond launching an unmatched roster of organizers into American politics, the UFW honed a wide variety of important tactics. To name just a few, the union took boycotting to new heights and contributed to the birth of modern anti-corporate consumer campaigns. It became a model of how to effectively rally the support of religious communities for social justice causes, and it brilliantly employed music and street theater. The union was ahead of its time in using mammoth grassroots field campaigns to win statewide elections. And, by connecting the toxic pesticide exposures suffered by farm workers to the dangers faced by Americans eating chemically tainted food, it forged an early model of environmental justice campaigning.

However, Shaw wildly overstates his case when he argues that the defining work of the UFW has since “set the course for America’s progressive campaigns – and will likely do so for decades to come.” For all its innovation, the farm workers movement did not pull its tactics from thin air. Today, not all who employ street theater, hunger strikes, house visits, or community-clergy alliances draw in any meaningful way from the union’s example. Indeed, very few have taken to heart what was truly compelling about the UFW’s campaigns: the way in which it combined the varied tactics from its toolbox in a powerful way. A fourth and final view of the union’s story would highlight the still unrealized possibilities presented by this unique synthesis.

**A joining of two traditions**

Former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist and Freedom Summer leader Bob Moses has argued that the Civil Rights Movement contained two distinct organizing traditions. Elaborating on Moses, scholar Charles Payne writes, “There was what he labels the community-mobilizing tradition, focused on large scale, relatively short-term public events. This is the tradition of Birmingham, Selma, the March on Washington, the tradition best symbolized by the work of Martin Luther King.” But there was another tradition as well, “one of community organizing, a
tradition with ... a greater emphasis on the long-term development of leadership in ordinary men and women, a tradition best epitomized, Moses argues, by the teaching and example of Ella Baker.”

Prior to founding the union, Chavez worked for the Saul Alinsky-modeled Community Service Organization, where he was trained by legendary community organizer Fred Ross, Sr. From the start, the UFW relied on intensive in-home meetings with workers, and its organizers carefully targeted community and workplace leaders as movement recruits. Later, Ross and Chavez would go on to mentor countless UFW personnel in tried-and-true Alinsky principles. The two, Shaw notes, “treated organizing as a profession, with a set of skills that had to be correctly implemented. A good heart was not enough; young people required training, on-the-job experience, and intensive feedback to nurture their talents.”

New recruits were given tremendous responsibility and autonomy very early. At the same time, vigilant oversight and feedback based on an established community-organizing methodology provided structure for their efforts.

In his post-UFW organizing, Marshall Ganz has kept alive the union’s community organizing practices, and he has continued to apply them to political field campaigning. Thus, it is not surprising that, when a new generation of dedicated young people was drawn to the Obama campaign, the recruits experienced a dose of intensive “freedom within structure” volunteering.

Cesar Chavez, however, drew not only from the Alinsky playbook, but also the Gandhian one. The way in which the UFW combined its community organizing with militant nonviolence and strategies of personal sacrifice is now probably the less examined, and certainly less replicated, side of its legacy. Like Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the union used civil disobedience and mass mobilization to create public crises around otherwise ignored injustices. In 1966, growers’ apprehension about escalating support for the blistered farm workers who were making a 300-mile peregrinación, or pilgrimage, from Delano to Sacramento prompted the UFW’s first major contract victory. In its wake, the conditions for conventional day-to-day organizing were transformed.

**Bridging a reopened gap**

Given that Gandhi had very carefully considered the techniques for using nonviolence to create mass spectacle and for harnessing the resulting momentum, it makes sense that Chavez claimed the Mahatma’s *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* as one of his “favorite organizing manuals.” But his love for Gandhi did not endear Chavez to other community and labor leaders. Saul Alinsky opposed fasting and told Chavez that his embrace of the tactic was “embarrassing.” As for trade unionists, Chatfield writes, “I doubt it comes as a surprise to anyone that Cesar Chavez was not viewed by the national body of the AFL-CIO as a bona-fide labor leader – one of their own, so to speak. They were correct; he was not.”

Chatfield believes that voluntary poverty, which Chavez championed, was central to the UFW’s success:

This voluntary deprivation of basic material goods for the sake of identifying with the enforced poverty of farm workers provided [Chavez] with the moral authority needed to command the respect not only of farm workers, but men and women of goodwill
everywhere. It was because of his commitment to voluntary poverty that he attracted people to volunteer with him. They wanted to be part of something selfless, authentic, and dedicated to the well-being of others. Yet few other leaders in the labor movement viewed voluntary poverty as very relevant to their organizing. Committed to bringing new workers into the American middle class, they saw little virtue in ascetic living.

Such tension persists today. Shaw cites some examples of contemporary unions using spiritual fasts and nonviolent civil disobedience, and participating in mass mobilizations such as the immigrant rights protests of 2006. But unfortunately these are rare exceptions. Those within the labor movement who advocate for greater experimentation in militant nonviolence will far more frequently hear echoes of the objections voiced by Alinsky and labor leaders of old. Unions have developed refined mechanisms for building committees of workplace leaders, turning out their own members for events, and using political leverage and on-the-job actions to pressure employers. But they demonstrate little ability to create public spectacle or rally broad-based support to their cause.

Then there are today’s scrappy organizations that are taking on long odds and are inclined to use nonviolent actions on a wide scale. These groups have the interest and conviction needed to build mass campaigns. Unfortunately, they rarely have the strategic foresight, resources, or organizing expertise needed to institutionalize temporary gains. They lack labor’s strengths.

In other words, we witness a situation today in which the possibilities revealed by Cesar Chavez at the peak of his prowess continue to be potent, but their promise remains unfulfilled. The gap that has reopened between organizing traditions is vast. And for those who seek to bridge it, the practice of telling the UFW’s story anew should become an ongoing habit.

Notes
1. In earlier incarnations, the United Farm Workers of America was known by names including the Farm Workers Association (FWA), the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA), and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC). For the purposes of this essay, the acronym UFW will be used to refer to all of the various manifestations of the farm workers organization founded by Cesar Chavez in 1962.
2. This account of the UFW’s 1972 campaign in Arizona and the origins of the “Sí, se puede” slogan is based on the versions provided in Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 92, and in Levy, Cesar Chavez, 463–8.
3. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 47.
5. The Farmworker Movement Documentation Project can be found online at http://farmworkermovement.com.
7. Ganz, Why David Sometimes Wins, 240. See also 313, footnote 6.
8. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, xi.
9. Ibid., 25.
11. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 1.
13. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 6.
15. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 92.
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