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Happy Birthday Cesar Chavez!
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No, he's NOT the president of Venezuela.

Yes, he was the man who popularized the slogan "Yes, we can!" Only he said "Si' se puede!"

Cesar Chavez, American young people should know, was an American who 40 years ago was inspiring young people to work long, hard hours for social justice. And not only did they do so in great numbers, but they actually achieved social justice, they won victories that kept them going. And many of them are going still, having made long, enjoyable, and effective careers of it.

Chavez organized the United Farm Workers, vastly improving the working conditions of farm workers in California and around the country. The UFW pioneered numerous tactics that have been used with great success ever since, including most famously the boycott. Half the country stopped eating grapes until the people who picked the grapes were allowed to form a union.

Now much of what we eat and otherwise consume is made by slave labor, sweatshop labor, and workers without rights or their basic needs met. Many of these products are shipped to us from distant lands. Some are produced in the United States, including California, where farm workers' power is not what it was.

But the people the UFW trained have taken their skills "[Beyond the Fields](#)," which is the title of a wonderful new book by Randy Shaw that chronicles the long-term effects of the UFW's successes. Techniques mastered by the UFW have been employed with great success beyond the fields, including the technique of targeting a corporation or politician from numerous angles at once. In addition to boycotts, the UFW pioneered the use of fasting, the framing of workers' issues in moral terms, actions aimed at gaining media attention, creating media with human billboards and other street theater,

encouraging civic participation among union members, coalition building, and voter outreach and election day activities that have proved consistently powerful and effective.

UFW veterans have used these techniques to elect better politicians, to reform numerous corporations, to win union contracts and better conditions for janitors, to build a movement for immigrants rights, and to advance an endless list of social causes. When I worked for ACORN, what I saw ACORN's organizers and members doing was straight out of the UFW. In fact, reading Chavez' writings was mandatory. A campaign like the one I wrote about [here](#) that won a half a billion dollars from a predatory bank for its victims was pure UFW, even if those working on it were a degree of separation or two removed from Cesar Chavez. "If there were a post-World War II Hall of Fame for activists in America, UFW veterans would dominate the inductees," writes Shaw.

That doesn't mean there haven't been failures and improvements, set backs and new innovations, and good techniques put to questionable ends. But, on the whole, the approach of the UFW is one we would clearly benefit from following more closely. We should focus on training and education. We should build activist organizations that inspire young people to join and sacrifice. That means taking principled moral positions and fighting for them. And it means delegating responsibility to young people and training them above all to train others. And it means taking risks.

The cry of "si' se puede!" comes out of a 1972 campaign to recall the governor of Arizona who had just signed an anti-labor bill. In four and a half months, the UFW registered almost 100,000 new voters, most of them poor Navajos and Mexican Americans. While the attorney general blocked the recall, four Mexican Americans and two Navajos were elected to the state legislature, and Mexican Americans were elected to local councils, judgeships, and school boards, and two years later to the office of governor. In the process, the UFW showed others how to alter politics by organizing volunteers to sign up new voters.

But the UFW didn't just register voters who could be counted on to vote for the lesser of two lousy candidates. The UFW backed candidates and got them elected while simultaneously forcing them to comply with farm workers' demands. This is the lesson that we've lost today, as we put massive efforts into electing candidates while making no demands of them. In 1974 the UFW was critical to the success of Jerry Brown's campaign for governor of California, and had high hopes that he would sign a bill friendly to farm labor once elected. But the UFW did more than hope, it got a similar bill introduced and forced Brown to publicly express his support for it. This required a sit-in in a campaign office staffed by friends and colleagues. Once Brown was governor, Chavez had to threaten a massive march to the capitol. The first Agricultural Labor Relations Act in the country was signed into law in June 1975, and UFW staff went on to coordinate Brown's presidential campaigns. They had earned his respect, something progressives today do not get from politicians by giving everything they have and never insisting on anything in return.

If Cesar Chavez were alive, he would be sitting in the office of a senator who is refusing to back the Employee Free Choice Act, he would be fasting, he would be refusing to leave, and he would be telling you Si Se Puede!

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BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator, David Swanson, is the author of the upcoming book *Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union* by Seven Stories Press and of the introduction to [The 35 Articles of Impeachment and the Case for Prosecuting George W. Bush](#) published by Feral. Swanson holds a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He has worked as a newspaper reporter and as a communications director, with jobs including press secretary for Dennis Kucinich's 2004 presidential campaign, media coordinator for the [International Labor Communications Association](#), and three years as communications coordinator for [ACORN](#), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Swanson is Co-Founder of [AfterDowningStreet.org](#), creator of [ConvictBushCheney.org](#) and Washington Director of Democrats.com, a board member of [Progressive Democrats of America](#), the [Backbone Campaign](#), and [Voters for Peace](#), a member of the legislative working group of [United for Peace and Justice](#), and convener of the accountability and prosecution working group of United for Peace and Justice. His website is www.davidswanson.org. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Swanson.

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