

¡Sí Se Puede - Celebrating César Chávez!



"Preservation of one's own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures"

- César Chávez

What does the pursuit of the American Dream look and feel like for the migrant farmworker? In the 1960s, for \$1 an hour, a human being worked a 12-hour day in the blazing sun. They did so with injured backs, bruised knees, sweaty brows, and with no healthcare or life insurance.

Many migrant farmworkers, who endured poor work conditions, low wages, rough treatment, exploitation, and social alienation, helped feed California and the nation for generations but often could not afford to feed themselves.

This American nightmare compelled César Chávez, an Arizona-born Mexican American, to effectively build on previous efforts to organize migrant farmworkers, leading to unionized victory under the slogan of "¡Sí Se Puede!" Decades later, Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States, borrowed the same slogan translated into English, "Yes We Can!"

On March 31 each year, we observe César Chávez Day, a federal commemorative holiday, and we pause to recognize the resilience of migrant farmworkers and the continued fight to improve working conditions for all who are overlooked, dehumanized, exploited, and taken for granted in the workplace.

Having grown up working in the fields, Chávez knew firsthand how unfair the life and labor conditions of a migrant farmworker could be. He understood that only collectively organized farmworkers could demand better working conditions and increased pay. Chávez's nonviolent strategies included boycotts of corporate farms, hunger strikes, and empowerment of farmworkers' voices. One of his most notable actions, a weeks-long 340-mile march to the state Capitol in Sacramento, started with 67 grape farmworkers aiming to raise awareness of their plight and gain support for their demands. Thousands of marchers joined the original group as they passed through one city to the next.

Once the marchers reached Sacramento, corporate growers signed the first contract with the United Farm Workers of America (formerly the National Farm Workers Association). The efforts of Chávez, along with those of labor leader and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta, led to New Deal rights from the 1930s being extended to farmworkers: Aid to Families with Dependent Children; unemployment insurance; workers compensation; and the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975, allowing farmworkers the right to collective bargaining and to unionize.

As the Hornet Family observes this well-deserved holiday, let us connect with this story and continue the work of becoming an antiracism and inclusive campus. Let us be conscious of the persistent inequities of living in a stratified society with normalized yet pathological hierarchies based on race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other factors. Let us never get comfortable with unmerited privileges that have favored some over others, such as corporate farmers over migrant farmworkers. Instead, let us recognize our dependence on, and the essential labor of, migrant farmworkers, whose toil produces the food in our grocery stores, on our tables, and in our bellies, and thus provides for our basic needs.

This is not a story of the past, but of the present. In our year of believing and recognizing some hard truths about the America that we love, let us also believe that we can do something about the imperfections on our campus, in our state, and across the nation, so that we can really become a more perfect union. ¡Sí Se Puede!

In partnership,

Dr. Mia Settles-Tidwell

Vice President for Inclusive Excellence and University Diversity Officer

Dr. Carlos Nevarez

Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

National Farmwork Awareness Week Events

Thu, March 31, 2022 - Cesar Chavez Holiday Observed (Holiday, Campus Closed)

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