

UC Berkeley
California Journal of Politics and Policy

Title

Review of Beyond the Fields

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/64w2p9jr>

Journal

California Journal of Politics and Policy, 1(1)

Author

Burt, Kenneth C

Publication Date

2009-07-08

DOI

10.5070/P26W2M

Peer reviewed

Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century; Randy Shaw, University of California Press, 2008.

Review of *Beyond the Fields*

Kenneth C. Burt*

California Federation of Teachers and UC Berkeley

Today, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi is ensconced in the top echelons of power in the nation's capitol. Few recall that when she initially ran for Congress that her opponent was far better known and was riding a wave of progressive politics as San Francisco's highest ranking gay elected official. How did the former state party chair out-organize her better-known opponent? She relied on a team

of talented organizers who drew on experience gained and techniques learned while working with the United Farm Workers (UFW). During its decade and a half heyday, from 1965 to 1980, the UFW produced a phenomenal number of organizers and agents of social change.

The UFW's courageous struggle to organize California agricultural workers and how it forged a generation of activists who went on to assume a variety of leadership roles in the civil society and politics is the heart of the aptly titled book, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century*. Randy Shaw provides a participant-observer's eye for baby boomers reflecting on a youthful adventure that changed their lives and reshaped California from the Central Valley to Sacramento and beyond.

Indeed, potential new chapters continue to unfold. Marshal Ganz, among the most able UFW strategists, helped design the phenomenally successful presidential

campaign that put Barack Obama in the White House. Ganz drew on a deep understanding of social networks and insights gained in overseeing the UFW's campaigns in the fields and at the ballot boxes, including presidential campaigns for Robert Kennedy and Jerry Brown.

The UFW created a culture of organizing that achieved remarkable results by combining mentoring and hands-on practice. Through often-extensive debriefings, new and experienced hands alike would refine their craft, always seeking to be more effective in their pursuits. Shaw describes the UFW extensive efforts to train and mentor young activists. "Mentors such as Fred Ross, Sr., Gilbert Padilla, Marshall Ganz, and Cesar Chavez himself treated organizing as a profession, with a set of skills that had to be implemented. A good heart was not enough; young people required training, on-the-job experience, and intensive feedback to nurture their talents." Shaw vividly describes how this approach grew out of the legendary Fred Ross Sr. training Chavez in the Community Services Organization (CSO) before the founding of what became the UFW. "Ross trained [Chavez] in the door-to-door, house meeting method of organizing that would become the UFW hallmark."

Shaw emphasizes the enduring power of this approach in shaping a cohort of activists whose training seems to have immunized them to the seduction of monetary rewards. Instead, individually and collectively they personify a

values-driven life of public service as union organizers, nonprofit administrators, and elected officials. They have been able to actualize meaning in their life, ironically, by learning to understand power relationships and their unique ability to make change. All-star organizer Jessica Govea captures the feeling when she notes, "We learned that we were capable of a lot more than we thought."

Shaw argues that Latino political engagement is markedly higher in California than in other states in terms of voter turnout and election of Latinos to the state legislature, and that success is a direct result of the UFW and its legacy. Exhibit A is the late Miguel Contreras. While at the helm of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, the former UFW organizer did much to realign California politics by uniting an insurgent immigrant rights movement and a renewed labor movement after the passage of Proposition 187, which denied education and health benefits to undocumented immigrants. In doing so, he strategically employed a mix of people power and financial largess to win one seat after another in the era of term limits.

Using the coalition-building skills central to the UFW's boycott successes, Contreras went beyond the Latino community—reaching into Jewish Hollywood for funding to elect Asians, African Americans, and gays and lesbians. Assembly Speaker Karen Bass owes her seat to Contreras for helping her defeat a rival backed

by the black establishment. Even Los Angeles's mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, benefited from the Contreras-created network of progressive, multicultural, elected officials and institutions.

If the book has a weakness, it is that some of the early history is oversimplified or a little off. A case in point is the DiGiorgio union election. Shaw writes that "the boycott had forced the powerful grower to hold an election" in 1967. The initial election occurred in 1966 and the UFW lost. The decision to arbitrate the election on terms favorable to the UFW was politically influenced. The critical moment occurred during the summer, 1966, convention of the Mexican American Political Association. MAPA held up its endorsement of Gov. Pat Brown, then in a heated contest with Ronald Reagan, until the governor promised to nullify the collective bargaining election at DiGiorgio. The on-site negotiations included UFW's Dolores Huerta, Lt. Gov. Glenn Anderson, and U.S. Undersecretary of Labor Jack Henning (all of whom knew each other through the CSO). Brown rewarded the Teamsters for their "understanding" by placing its West Coast director, Einar Mohn, on the UC Board of Regents, a rare political plumb for a labor official.

Shaw is far too modest in his assessment that in pushing Governor Brown in 1966, there was "little to offer him politically." The UFW had by then mobilized allies from the CSO days in labor and liberal circles, as well as

middle-class Mexican Americans, as demonstrated at the MAPA convention. This power base was built on extensive networks and thousands of Spanish-speaking voters. Under the leadership of Chavez and Ross, CSO had systematically registered 440,000 voters between 1947 and 1960. In 1959, Governor Brown appointed CSO lobbyist Dolores Huerta to a state board to raise the wages of women and minors in agriculture. And in 1961, under Huerta's guidance, the California State Legislature passed a bill providing noncitizens old-age pensions, a remarkable feat even by today's standards of heightened Latino political power.

This is not to take away from Chavez's tenacity or strategic brilliance, the power of the movement to inspire sacrifice and dedication from a wide range of individuals and organizations, or the David-vs.-Goliath nature of the encounter. But Chavez and the UFW had well-placed friends and knew how to leverage them.

This book should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand the development of progressive, multicultural politics in California. This is particularly true for those seemingly baffled by the influence of labor-community alliances in the state capitol and in city halls across the state. This movement jump-started Speaker Pelosi's electoral career and placed her in a position today to partner with President Obama, the first U.S. president to serve as a community organizer.

Ultimately, influence and legacy are at the heart of this well-organized and accessible book that makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the UFW's enduring contribution to the larger cause of economic and social justice and to the reshaping of the political landscape. It is fitting that Randy Shaw, who assists low-income tenants, decided to tell the story of the idealistic activists who operate both in the corridors of power and as advocates for working families and those on society's margins.