
JUSTICE FOR JANITORS

RICH LESSONS IN THE POWER OF MATH

BY BOB PETERSON

The picture book *iSí Se Puede!/Yes, We Can!* by Diana Cohn is a great picture book to use with students to show that math matters. The bilingual English/Spanish book, beautifully illustrated by Francisco Delgado, tells the story of a janitor strike in Los Angeles in 2000, when nearly 8,500 janitors put down their mops and brooms and demanded a living wage and dignity. The solidarity of many people helped the janitors win their three-week strike, which in turn sparked organizing drives in cities across the nation. As of early 2005, more than 200,000 janitors, most of them people of color, were organized into the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The text of the book tells the story of the strike from the perspective of the son of a single mother who is a janitor. While the book itself does not include much explicit math, it provides a context for rich lessons in the power of math.



THIS ILLUSTRATION FROM *iSÍ SE PUEDE!* HIGHLIGHTS THE POWER OF WORKING PEOPLE.

DO THE MATH

Students can work on understanding large numbers, multi-digit multiplication, problem-solving, and percentages through examining data such as:

- Because of the strike, 8,500 janitors won a pay raise from \$7.20 to \$9.10 an hour. What percent increase was this? How does this compare to the rate of inflation?
- Assuming a 30-hour work week, how much money did a janitor earn (before taxes) with the old wage and with the new one? What is the difference?

- Many of the janitors are forced to work only part time and thus don't earn enough money to prevent their families from living in poverty. In 2012 the U.S. government said a family of four had to earn more than \$23,050 per year to be considered above the poverty line. Even on the new salary of \$9.10 an hour, if a person with a family of four was only able to work 30 hours a week, how much below the 2012 federal poverty threshold would the family be?
- In the book the mother says to her son: "Even though I work full time as a janitor, I also have to clean houses and wash clothes on the weekend. That means we don't have any time together. And I can't afford to buy the medicine Abuelita needs to help her sore bones feel better." According to the SEIU, most janitors get no healthcare benefits from their jobs. In 2012, the average cost of a family health-insurance premium was \$15,745 a year. How does that figure compare to the salary of a janitor working at \$9.10 an hour for 40 hours a week? ■

For additional information on Justice for Janitors, search under "Justice for Janitors" on the SEIU website: www.seiu.org/a/search.php. For additional teaching ideas using this book, see www.rethinkingschools.org/math.