

The Ethnic Coalition: TWLF Strike at San Francisco State University

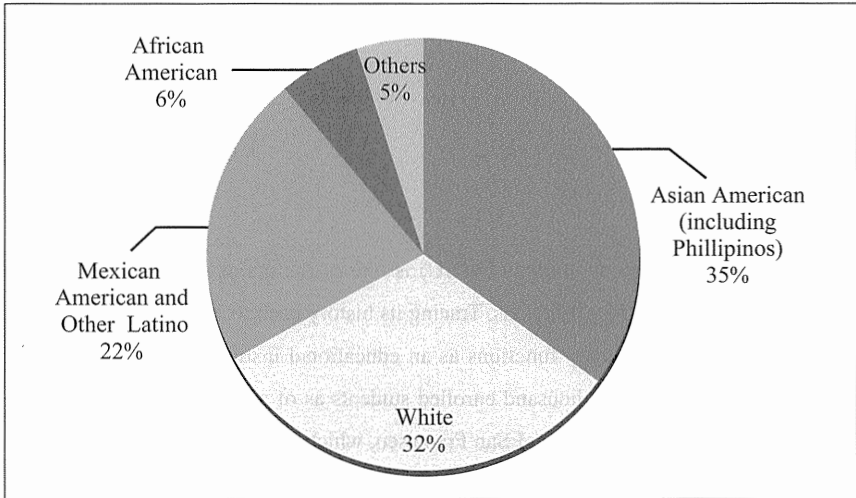
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Introduction

San Francisco State University (SFSU) is one of the major campuses among the California State University affiliations. Tracing its history back to 1899, SFSU now holds eight colleges. The university functions as an educational institution in a metropolitan city, with over twenty-nine thousand enrolled students as of academic year 2010–2011.¹ The campus is located in the city of San Francisco, which is renowned internationally for being a center of arts, finance, and technology.

San Francisco has also been acclaimed for the ethnic and cultural diversity of its residents. The student body of SFSU mirrors this demographical fact. According to the statistics provided by the university, undergraduate students can be divided roughly into three racial groups: Asian American, White, and Latino. Asian Americans make up the numerical majority. When Filipinos are added, the two groups account for 35% of the student body. The second largest group is White students, who make up 32% of undergraduates. The third largest group is Latino. When the students who identify as Chicano/Mexican American are combined with the numbers of Latino student, they comprise 22% of the entire student body.² As these figures show, “No single group makes up a majority” at SFSU.³

Figure 1. Percentage Distribution of Undergraduate Students by Ethnicity (As of 2010)



Source: San Francisco States University's home page, "SF State Facts 2010–2011."

San Francisco State University is also the first and only institution in the nation that holds an independent college of Ethnic Studies. The College of Ethnic Studies is a conjunction of four different departments: Asian American Studies, Africana (African American) Studies, Raza (Chicano/Mexican American) Studies, and American Indian (Native American) Studies (words in parentheses added by the author).⁴

This unique college was created after a strike was initiated by a group of students in 1969. The strike, which began in November 1968 and lasted throughout March 1969, was an upheaval that sought various reforms of the university. As a result of the strike, SFSU became the center of national newspaper and magazine coverage for a time.

What brought the student strike to occur? Why did it happen in San Francisco and why did it occur at that time? This paper focuses on the background of the student strike caused by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), which was a coalition of several different student organizations whose ethnic backgrounds were various. It also describes how the strike unfolded, casting light on the philosophy and demands of the student coalition.

This paper also focuses on an aspect of the TWLF strike that has not been highlighted in the past studies—the diversity of the protestors’ backgrounds. The author speculates that, even though they were rallying under the same umbrella, each participant group held their own perspectives. They were in unison in their demand for a College of Ethnic Studies, but their aspirations behind the goal might be various.

Prelude to the Strike

During the 1960s, a number of social movements were building in the United States. In 1964, the Mississippi Summer Project was conducted. The driving forces of this project were members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who became aware of the poignant racism toward African Americans in the Deep South.⁵ In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Free Speech Movement erupted in September 1964 at the University of California, Berkeley. These social movements were initiated by students who sought to remedy racial discrimination and social injustice.

It was no coincidence that non-white students became sensitive and alarmed with the problems surrounding them. The social practices and educational systems had barred them from fair competition. The sentiment held by those minority students was common: that their voices were not being heard.⁶ Their frustration became embodied in organized efforts, which eventually led to a coalition of non-white students.

Formation of the Third World Liberation Front

Little research has spared more than a few paragraphs about the origin of the Third World Liberation Front. However, it is known that the TWLF was formed at San Francisco State University in 1968. It was unique as the first experimental alliance among college students. The founding members hailed from diverse student organizations: the Black Students Union (BSU), the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), the Philippine American Collegiate Endeavor (PEACE), the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), the Latin American Students Organization (LASO), and an American Indian student organization. The Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) joined them in the summer of the same year.⁷

While a lot of research has been conducted on the civil rights movements and students activism of the 1960s, only a limited number of studies examine the significance of the Third World Liberation Front. Due to the multi-cultural composition of the coalition, the history of TWLF has been sporadically described in each study of particular ethnic groups. Carlos Muñoz Jr., who wrote a book that comprehensively analyzed the Chicano student movement from the 1960s to the 1970s, briefly mentions the TWLF. He admits that Mexican American students were vital participants of the TWLF strike, but spares only one page to mention the organization. Muñoz observes that the “San Francisco State strike was significant because it marked the first time that Mexican American and other third world students activists united to create a politically explosive ‘rainbow’ coalition.”⁸

Akira Kinoshita conducted a thorough investigation of the political activism among Filipino American students. During the TWLF strike, Filipino students actively supported the organization and its activities. While highlighting Filipino students’ involvement in the group, Kinoshita briefly mentions the TWLF. He states that the revolutionary TWLF strike “brought a significant impact on American society...through the network between the students and faculty members and also via media coverage (English translation is done by the author).”⁹ As these observations show, more studies are expected to comprehensively examine TWLF as a unique, inter-ethnic student coalition.

The name “TWLF” was adopted from the fact that the group was a united body of non-white students, who had been identified as vulnerable, “Third World” people. One member who was affiliated with LASO recounted, “The condition of black people, brown people, yellow people, and red people is essentially that we are all oppressed systematically as individuals and as a people by the society.”¹⁰ This statement reflects a notion shared among the TWLF members despite the disparity of backgrounds: the desire to redress a social system unfavorable to racial minorities.

Later on, the TWLF came to be known for its leadership by BSU members; the African American lecturers teaching at SFSU, George Murray and Nathan Hare, became the focus of media coverage. Other groups, such as Chicano and Asian American students, were also active participants of TWLF.¹¹

A student newspaper from that time emphasized that all TWLF members were fighting for a common cause, and achieving goals for one particular group was not their true intention. Referring to the names of Filipino, Chicano, Chinese, Japanese, and African American organizations, the student newspaper writer called TWLF “a working together of Black, Brown, and Yellow students.... No one group had leadership.” The writer, supposedly a Chicano student, was indignant about the media’s generalized descriptions of TWLF, observing that “they don’t want people to know that it’s not just Blacks that are protesting racism that runs rampant in this country [sic].”¹²

Another statement by a Filipino American student group echoes this perspective. It conveys a message that racism was not an issue affecting only African Americans.

We, the Filipinos, have come to the realization, along with our Third World brothers, that the struggle for self-determination is the struggle of all Third World peoples....

It is therefore evident to Filipinos at SF State that racism is not only leveled at our Black brother, but at us as well.¹³

Objectives of TWLF

It was November 6th, 1968, when the Third World Liberation Front embarked on its historic strike on campus. The organization’s primary aim was to show their discontent with the administration of San Francisco State University. The TWLF students marched through the campus with placards in their hands. The members also employed the tactics of “sit-in” to occupy school administration buildings. Their intention was to show the administration how urgent their demands were. On the following days, TWLF succeeded in shutting down the campus—no classes were held for two and a half weeks.

The strikers consistently announced that they had fifteen “demands” they wanted to be met, most of which centered around policies and curriculum reform. These were provided in the form of a petition to the university. The fifteen demands can be summarized into the following categories. First, the reassignment of African American and Mexican American lecturers who had been suspended by the university. The TWLF urged not only the retrieval of these staff members but also increased remuneration for these teachers, arguing that minority lecturers were not paid fairly. Secondly, they

demanded that all non-white students who wished to enroll in the College of Ethnic Studies at SFSU be accepted in the following semester.

The TWLF students firmly believed that non-white groups must have a voice in deciding the curriculum and course development of the university. The following statement vividly illustrates this perspective.

A complete and accurate representation of minority peoples' role in the past and the present conditions of this state is nonexistent.... The Third World Liberation Front is demanding a school of Ethnic Area Studies specifically organized to establish studies of nonwhite peoples within the United States.¹⁴

Upon the organization's fervent request, the faculty of SFSU formed a task force to examine the process for the establishment of the College of Ethnic Studies. This shows that the faculty strongly backed the meeting of TWLF demands. They even distributed the students' petition paper during a faculty meeting.¹⁵

After the TWLF strike, San Francisco State University became the first institution in the nation to have an independent school in the field of Ethnic Studies, thanks to the prolonged negotiations between TWLF and the university administration. Since the fall of 1969, when the College of Ethnic Studies formally began, the programs have expanded, and the school has installed itself with rich courses of various ethnic studies. Currently, the college consists of two departments with five different programs: Africana Studies, American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Race and Resistance Studies, and Raza Studies (Mexican American Studies). Students who enroll in the college can earn a degree in their related study areas, according to their interest. The college offers a bachelor's degree in Africana Studies, American Indian Studies, and Asian American studies. Furthermore, master's degrees are offered in the college for those who seek them under the title of Ethnic Studies or Asian American Studies.

Today, six thousand students are enrolled at the College of Ethnic Studies, which has forty-seven full-time faculty members and offers 175 courses each semester.¹⁶ The College of Ethnic Studies has earned an exemplary national reputation, which traces its origin back to the TWLF strike.

Participants of the TWLF Strike

As mentioned earlier, the students who joined together to found TWLF were members of various ethnic organizations. The organization thus became well-known as a diverse coalition of non-white students. However, white students composed a visible part of its membership.¹⁷ A statement by a Black Student Union president illustrates how white students were perceived by non-white TWLF members. In a newspaper article, the African American leader “called on Negro, Mexican-American and Oriental students to join the strike and said it would be ‘all right’ if whites joined in.”¹⁸ This comment seems to show that the African American leader distinguishes himself from white participants. The Mexican American Student Confederation also reflects TWLF perspectives toward white students. It reads that the BSU and TWLF:

Are a vanguard force that is leading this strike...the role of white strikers is to educate their fellow students to the need to fight against the class nature of the university, to an understanding of their own oppression, and to the role of racism.¹⁹

This statement highlights that non-white students planned to be the spring force of the strike. They considered the role of white students would be fulfilled by becoming aware or making others aware of the struggles of non-white minorities.

Another aspect of the TWLF participants is that not only minority students but also the local labor unions readily supported the strike. A newspaper article reports that “professional agitators” were behind the strike activities. A state school superintendent observed that “there are 40 to 50 faculty members who work hand-in-glove with the activists and should be removed.”²⁰ These descriptions suggest that the TWLF operated under some influence of labor unions. For example, the American Federation of Teachers, which was affiliated with AFL-CIO, supported the TWLF and the Black Student Union to conduct the strike.²¹ On this point, William Wei observes that the strike mirrors “the class nature” of the participants. According to Wei, San Francisco State University can be defined as a “working-class commuter school.”²² Thus, it was expected that people of working-class backgrounds, racial minorities, and immigrant households would attend.

Conclusion

The TWLF marked its presence as a unique student coalition across heterogeneous groups. The primary feature of the TWLF is being a unified, non-white student affiliation. Catching the tail end of the civil rights movement, Mexican American and Asian American students participated in TWLF along with their African American counterparts. Each group held their ethnic consciousness and distinctive perspectives toward racism in society. However, they did not isolate or exclude any particular group due to the differences in racial background. Not only non-white but also white students joined and supported the TWLF strike. The student coalition was also significant because its members included university faculty and labor union members as well as enrolled university students.

The TWLF fulfilled its primary purpose, and the strike ended in March 1969. However, the group's influence is still significant and on-going. The most prominent achievement of TWLF was the establishment of the College of Ethnic Studies. Their demands to obtain "control" over university curriculum were met and this outcome can be seen in the expansion of the programs of the college. The examination of TWLF's tactics and philosophy suggests that the alliance manifested potential for the development of coalitions among diverse peoples and the creation of groups that transcend race, ethnicity, and class.



The SFSU campus on a TWLF strike day

Source: Howard Finberg et al. (eds.), *Crisis at San Francisco State* (San Francisco, 1969)

Why Stick Your Neck Out Now?

WHY SHOULD I BE AMONGST THE FIRST TO GO ON STRIKE?

This question is often used as a subterfuge for those individuals unwilling to make the sacrifice of class attendance to support the much more vital implementation of the Third World programs. There would be no need to answer this question if the large numbers of students who support the demands, yet hide behind their anxiety that their fellow students won't, join with them, expressed their beliefs on the picket lines. If every supporter is unwilling to make the first step, then the just demands of the TWLF will never be met.

Written and
Distributed by
**TWLF
and
Strike
Support
Committee**



STRIKE NOW!

for information
call 642-6727

Errata: Demand 1a of the TWLF should read
"Admission, financial aid and academic assistance for all Third World students who can learn and contribute."

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Flyer of TWLF strike in 1968

(Sutro Library, San Francisco State College Strike Collection)

- 1 <http://www.sfsu.edu/~puboff/sfsufact/archive/1011/students.htm>.
- 2 In the original chart, Filipinos are shown as an independent group. This group's percentage ratio is 7%. <http://www.sfsu.edu/~puboff/sfsufact/archive/1011/students.htm>
- 3 A brochure of the SFSU Graduate Studies program.
- 4 <http://www.sfsu.edu/~ethnicst/>
- 5 James P. O'Brien, "The Development of the New Left," *The Annals of the American Academy* 395 (May 1971): 18.
- 6 James Garrett, who served as a chairman of the Black Student Union (BSU) at SFSU, observed that in 1966 he spent the summer with some students from San Francisco State College in the South. His intention was "to let them [the students] see what was happening" in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and he stated that the experience "changed everybody." William H. Orrick, Jr. and San Francisco State College Study Team, *Shut It Down!: A College in Crisis, San Francisco State College October, 1968—April, 1969* (Washington, 1969), 81; David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 183–184.
- 7 "Asian American Movement 1968," <http://aam1968.blogspot.com/2008/02/stand-up-bay-area-asian-american.html> ; Orrick, *Shut It Down!*, 100.
- 8 Carlos Muñoz Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (New York: Verso, 1989), 69.
- 9 Akira Kinoshita, *Esunikku Gakusei Soshiki ni Miru "Sokoku": Firi-pin Kei Amerikajin no Nashonarizumu to Bunka* ["Homeland" in Ethnic Student Organizations: Nationalism and Culture of Filipino Americans] (Tokyo: Fuji Shuppan, 2009), 90–91.
- 10 Orrick, *Shut It Down!*, 102.
- 11 William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 5.
- 12 *Bronze* 1(2), January 1968
- 13 "Phillipine [sic] American College Endeavor," Third World Liberation Front file, Sutro Library, San Francisco State University.
- 14 "Third World Liberation Front: School of Ethnic Area Studies," Third World Liberation Front file, Sutro Library, San Francisco State University.
- 15 "Third World Liberation Front's Position on the Faculty's 'Task Force,'" (handed out on November 19th, 1968), Sutro Library, San Francisco State University.
- 16 "Welcome to the College of Ethnic Studies," San Francisco State University, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~ethnicst/index.html>.
- 17 Stewart Burns, *Social Movements of the 1960s: Searching for Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publication, 1990), 102; Orrick, *Shut It Down!*, 100.
- 18 *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1968, in Helene Whiston's strike scrapbook, San Francisco State College Strike Collection.
- 19 San Francisco State Strike Committee, *On Strike, Shut It Down* (1969), 9.
- 20 *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 27, 1968, in Helene Whiston's strike scrapbook, San Francisco State College Strike Collection.
- 21 *Los Angeles Times*, Ibid; "Twenty Years Ago...A Timeline of the San Francisco State College 1968–69 Strike," Third World Liberation Front file, Sutro Library, San Francisco State University.
- 22 Wei, *Asian American Movement*, 16.