

## **Berkeley Strikes Back: The Third World Liberation Front**

“The Third World College is the idea of having sovereignty over questions of admissions, evaluation of curriculum content, who teaches the courses and what counts as credentials.” -*Garzo Montalvo*

In 1969, protests led by a coalition of minority students at the University of California Berkeley, pushed the University to break barriers in education with the creation of the first Ethnic Studies Department at a major university. Strikes led by the student organization, Third World Liberation Front, protested the white, euro-centric curriculum taught throughout California and the nation. The success of the strikes at Berkeley sparked a national discussion on how we educate and led to the foundation of ethnic studies departments around the nation, integrating minority representation into higher education.

After WWII, America’s economy boomed and the expansion of the middle class allowed for more high school graduates to attend college. The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, paid for veterans to attend public universities, creating further incentive to attend college. However, for many minority students, college was not an option due to barriers in education such as a lack of funding, segregation, and racial bias in the college application process. As a result, minorities with a college degree were less than half the number of white students with degrees. By the 1960s, some universities were starting to address how to make their schools more diverse and equitable. In 1964, the University of California, Berkeley instituted its Education Opportunity Program to make the school more accessible, in part by soliciting students at local community colleges. By 1968, minority enrollment at universities nationwide was at an all time high. However, minority students who did attend universities were taught with curriculums that emphasized the history of European white males, leaving the histories of minority students un-represented.

The 1960s brought an era of social dissent and around the nation students were protesting on college campuses. The University of California Berkeley was known widely for student resistance and in 1965 gained national press because of its student organized free speech movement. During this time, tensions between administrators and minority students at neighboring San Francisco State College were rising. Six Black Student Union members were arrested after a conflict with a reporter and a graduate student was suspended for political activism, including his role as the Minister of Education for the Black Panther Party. In February of 1968, the newly appointed president of the college handed in his resignation due to student pressure. Minority student activists united under the banner Third World Liberation Front to create a diverse coalition fighting for representation at the college. This coalition included major campus activism groups such as the Black Student Union, the Asian American Political Alliance, the Mexican American Student Confederation, and the Native American Student Union. These students argued that the white euro-centric education being taught fueled racism because of ignorance, unworthiness because of

race or gender, and lowered academic and social performance for students who did not feel represented.

After the formation of the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State, Berkeley students came together under the same banner. Berkeley's Third World Liberation Front went on strike with the goal of creating a Third World College that would teach Ethnic Studies courses such as African American History, Chicano Literature, and Asian American Studies. Strike leaders sent a list of demands to the University's Board of Directors, primarily demanding the creation of the Third World College with minorities in positions of power. Tensions on campus grew strained as more students left classes to join marches and demonstrations. California's governor, Ronald Reagan, opposed the student's political power, and as promised in his election campaign, tried to suppress the strikers by declaring a state of emergency. The National Guard was deployed, escalating the violence on campus. By the start of second semester 1969, the strikes had grown and the Third World Liberation Front was occupying much of campus. After 10 weeks of conflict, administrators finally agreed to negotiate with the student strikers. By March, compromises between protest leaders and administrators resulted in the creation of an Ethnic Studies department, with negotiations for a Third World College pending. The vote to establish this department by the University's Senate was an overwhelming 98%. The strikes at UC Berkeley broke barriers in education with the establishment of an Ethnic Studies department that elevated the voices of minorities in higher education.

In the decade following the creation of Berkeley's Ethnic Studies Department, students impacted by the example of the Third World Liberation Front realized that change at their universities was possible. Protests in support of creating ethnic studies departments and hiring more professors of color that began at Berkeley, spread across the nation. In late 1970, Bowling Green State University in Ohio formed an Ethnic Studies Center in response to student demands and within a few years was offering a full spectrum of ethnic studies classes. By 1993, there were more than 700 Ethnic Studies programs in universities around the nation. The Third World Liberation Front strikes resulting in the establishment of Ethnic Studies forced the expansion of America's curriculum. In 1981, after teaching in California's public schools, Rodolfo Acuña published, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, a textbook on Mexican-American history. Following the creation of ethnic studies departments, universities were integrating minorities' views into their curriculum.

Since the Third World strikers broke barriers in higher education, a rising number of public school administrations and high school students have started discussions around ethnic study requirements in secondary education. Vermont and Oregon have enacted laws requiring Ethnic Studies be taught in elementary and high schools and many states such as California have proposed laws that would make Ethnic Studies a high school graduation requirement. In 2013 only 1% of public school students in California had access to ethnic studies courses. However, over 90% of students in the state's largest district are students of color. In 2010, Arizona banned Mexican-American Studies in the Tucson school district, stating the program and content were too controversial. Students and teachers protested and the ban was ruled unconstitutional, bringing attention to the importance of ethnic studies, not only for students of color, but for all students.

Across the country, high school students are taking steps to create systematic change. The Third World Liberation Front strikes forever changed education, allowing generations of minority students to stand up for their histories and show the importance of who they are.

The Third World Liberation Front strikes of 1969, broke barriers in education when the University of California Berkeley met the demands of student strikers, resulting in the creation of an Ethnic Studies department, now ranked the best in the nation. The strikes in California became the starting point for students everywhere to demand minority representation in education. Today, students are following the example of the Third World Liberation Front by advocating for required ethnic studies classes in high schools across the country. The strikes at UC Berkeley inspired students to fight for an inclusive, equitable, education system representing all.