Third World Liberation Front Strikes of 1968

In the 1960s, U.S. colleges experienced a rapid increase in the enrollment of students of color. These students demanded the creation of a Third World College to restructure academic programs and include courses on the histories, struggles, and contributions of Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latin communities. They believed this change would create an educational environment that accurately reflected the experiences of all students and empowered their communities. In the spring of 1968, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) was formed at San Francisco State University (SFSU) as a coalition of student organizations dedicated to fighting racism and advocating for educational equity and space for marginalized voices. The movement arose in response to the lack of diversity and representation at SFSU.

San Francisco State University (SFSU) was founded in 1899 to address the growing need for educators in California. In its early years, the institution was predominantly white, with limited representation of students of color in both the student body and faculty. Like many universities of the time, SFSU's academic structure was organized into traditional departments such as humanities, sciences, social sciences, and professional studies. However, the curriculum was largely Eurocentric, with few courses focusing on non-Western history or the contributions of marginalized communities. During the 1960s, the university began to see a small but growing population of students of color.

The TWLF can be categorized as left-leaning, with students advocating for systemic change both within the educational institution and society at large. Their demands for ethnic studies, the inclusion of marginalized voices in the curriculum, and the push for increased faculty diversity were all rooted in a broader movement for racial justice and equality. The TWLF would best be classified as liberal reformers, rather than conservative crusaders, since their goal was to transform the structure of higher education to more accurately reflect and serve the diverse student body. This stands in contrast to conservative crusaders, who typically advocate for preserving the traditional, often exclusionary, university curriculum.

On November 6, 1968, students and faculty launched a strike that lasted until March 21, 1969, marking it as the longest student-led strike in U.S. academic history. This event began between students and administration on May 2, 1967, when students arranged a sit-in at the office of the newly appointed president of the university, Dr. John Summerskill, in protest of the Selective Students Committee’s access to students’ academic standing. The events included the suspension and firing of highly respected educators of color. The Black Student Union saw the need of the other ethnic student groups to organize. One year before the strike, six assailants were arrested and suspended, and there’s rising tension between students. Individuals sympathetic to the six suspended students began protesting in the administration building at SFSU, leading Dr. John Summerskill to close the campus. Additionally, the protests against the Vietnam War further the tension between the administration and students. On Feburary 22 1968, Dr. Summerskill resigned from his post, which later replaced by Dr. Robert Smith. However, the tension continued to rise, The Thrid World Liberation Front occupied the school’s YMCA on March 23, 1968, which forced all YMCA employees to evacuate. The protest led to the police involvement, which led to the arrest of 26 individuals out of the 400 protestors. In the fall of 1968 semester, President Smith refused to assign George Mason Murray (the Ministry of Education for the Black Panther Party), a graduate student and instructor in the English department, to a non-teaching position. This happened after Murray’s statement to students where he said “We are slaves, and the only way to become free is to kill all the slave masters.” This also led Murray to be suspended by Dr. Smith. Therefore, this strikes the protest again on November 6, 1968. This event continues, and led to the resignation of Dr. Smith, and President Hayakawa became acting president and ordered that there shall be no more gatherings at the center of campus. Thus, the members and students continued to strike on campus. After months of violence and strikes, on March 20, 1969, the TWLF, Black Student Union (BSU), and members of the selection committee of SFSU came to an agreement, which ended the strike.

Overall, TWLF had multiple demands during the strike at the campus. They demanded: 1.) the creation a School of Ethnic Studies controlled by students from each ethnic group, with authority over hiring faculty, directors, administrators, and curriculum, 2.) allocate 50 faculty positions to the School of Ethnic Studies, with 20 specifically for Black Studies, 3.) ensure that the College admits all non-white students who apply for Spring semester, 4.) accept all non-white student applications, and 5.) retain George Murray and any other faculty members chosen by non-white students to teach.

I believe that the TWLF was highly effective in making a significant difference on campus, drawing on Coley and Das’s analyses of creating space. Coley emphasizes the importance of educational opportunities, and TWLF successfully transformed the curriculum at SFSU. The absence of ethnic studies programs highlighted the need to better serve the university’s diverse student body. The creation of the School of Ethnic Studies was a groundbreaking achievement, giving students of color a dedicated space to explore their histories and cultures in higher education. This protest not only enriched SFSU but also inspired similar changes at universities across the United States. Additionally, Coley also discusses the role of human resources in creating space, which was crucial to the success of TWLF’s efforts. The diversity within TWLF’s membership brought together student activists with unique experiences of discrimination and marginalization, fueling their motivation. While many faculty members faced significant pressure, some offered critical support and guidance, bolstering the movement. Lastly, TWLF demonstrated exceptional organizational capacity. Their ability to sustain a months-long strike and coordinate large-scale protests reflects a high level of strategic planning. By focusing on key demands—such as the creation of an ethnic studies program and increased faculty diversity—they maintained clarity and purpose in their activism. This synergy and dedication further strengthened their position and contributed to their success. Based on these analyses, I believe that TWLF made exceptional changes throughout the U.S.

In conclusion, the TWLF played a pivotal role in reshaping San Francisco State University and set a precedent for educational reform across the United States. Through persistent activism, they achieved the creation of the School of Ethnic Studies, establishing a lasting space for marginalized voices. As Coley’s analysis highlights, the TWLF’s success stemmed from their ability to create educational opportunities, leverage human resources, and demonstrate exceptional organizational capacity. Their efforts remain an inspiring example of how collective action can challenge academic structures and bring about meaningful change across the country.

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