

Youth Activism Stations: East L.A. School Walkouts

Article adapted from the LA Times:

<https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-1968-east-la-walkouts-20180301-htm1story.html>

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East L.A., 1968: ‘Walkout!’ The day high school students helped ignite the Chicano power movement

Teachers at Garfield High School were winding down classes for the approaching lunch break when they heard the startling sound of people — they were not sure who — running through the halls, pounding on classroom doors. “Walkout!” they were shouting. “Walkout!” They looked on in disbelief as hundreds of students streamed out of classrooms and assembled before the school entrance, their clenched fists held high. “Viva la revolución!” they called out. “Education, not eradication!” Soon, sheriff’s deputies were rumbling in.

It was just past noon on a sunny Tuesday, March 5, 1968 — the day a Mexican American revolution began. Soon came walkouts at two more Eastside high schools, Roosevelt and Lincoln, in protest of run-down campuses, lack of college prep courses, and teachers who were poorly trained, indifferent or racist.

By the time the “blowouts” peaked about a week later, 22,000 students had stormed out of class, delivered impassioned speeches and clashed with police. Scenes of rebellion filled newspapers and television screens. School trustees held emergency meetings to try to quell the crisis; Mayor Sam Yorty suggested students had fallen under the influence of “communist agitators.”

The East L.A. walkouts 50 years ago were the uniquely California embodiment of the fury and hope that marked much of 1968. The first act of mass militancy by Mexican Americans in modern California history set the tone for activism across the Southwest as America drifted into a year of social turmoil, assassinations, war and disillusionment. The walkouts focused national attention on a new force on the American political scene, the Chicano movement. Once a pejorative term, “Chicano” was adopted by a new generation of urbanized Mexican Americans as an emblem of ethnic pride, cultural awareness and a commitment to community.

“We caught the entire nation by surprise,” said David Sanchez, founder of the militant Brown Berets, which had its seeds in the movement for educational reform and then took on farmworker rights, police brutality and the issue that managed to mobilize just about everyone who was protesting in 1968: the Vietnam War. “Before the walkouts, no one cared that substandard schools made it all but impossible for Chicano youths



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to find strength and pride in their culture, language and history — or to make the most of their lives,” Sanchez said.

Although the walkouts seemed spontaneous, they grew out of years of social activism. Since 1963, Camp Hess Kramer, a Jewish summer camp in Malibu, had hosted motivational programs for outstanding East L.A. students, who shared grievances about their underperforming high schools and neglected neighborhoods. Others stopped in at the Social Action Training Center, an effort run out the Church of the Epiphany in Lincoln Heights by John Luce, an Episcopal priest who supported labor leader Cesar Chavez.

“For over 20 years, the Mexican American has suffered at the hands of the Anglo establishment. He is discriminated against in

schooling, housing, in employment and in every other phase of life. Because of this situation, the Mexican American has become the lowest achiever of any minority group in the entire Southwest.”



What people were only beginning to realize was that — much as the students at a Florida high school this year have seized the debate over gun control from the adults — it was the high school students of East L.A. who would refuse to wait for the adults to act.

In the walkouts’ aftermath, the organizers basked in support from high-profile leaders, including Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, who made time to congratulate some students on the tarmac at Santa Monica Airport while in California to meet Cesar Chavez.

But perhaps the walkouts’ greatest accomplishment was fostering in the Mexican American community a sense of possibility — the realization that a just cause sometimes requires speaking up.

“Until that day, it never crossed my mind that Garfield High was run-down, overcrowded and lagging behind public schools in wealthier white neighborhoods,” said Rodriguez, who later became a prize-winning columnist at the San Jose Mercury News. “All that changed after the blowouts.”