

East L.A. Chicano student walkouts: 50 years later

UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center looks back at a critical moment in the Civil Rights Era

Jessica Wolf | March 09, 2018



La Raza Photograph Collection, [Protesting the police](#), The East L.A. 13 were seen as wrongfully detained because of their involvement with and support of Chicana and Chicano student walkouts.



Luis C. Garza/La Raza Photograph Collection, Rally at Placita Park, Supporters of Sal Castro's began their rally at Placita Park before making their way to the school board meeting.



La Raza Photograph Collection, Bring back Sal Castro, Protestors demand that the LAUSD board of education reinstate teacher Sal Castro, who assisted the student demonstrators.



Devra Weber/La Raza Photograph Collection, Roosevelt High School protests, Students and community supporters picket Roosevelt High School as students who were locked in look on.



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In early March 1968, nearly 20,000 students from the predominantly Chicano/Chicana neighborhoods of East Los Angeles walked out of their classrooms to call attention to the racial injustice and inequity rampant in public schools. It was the first mass demonstrations by Chicano and Chicana people in a major urban center.

The high school and college students who took part in the walkouts in 1968 were among those who would help establish the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA the following year.

"The walkouts became a focal point of the Chicano civil rights movement, bringing larger public attention to the unequal access to quality education experienced by the Chicano population in Los Angeles and elsewhere," said Chon Noriega, director of UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center.

The students who organized these events were arrested and tried for conspiracy, which speaks to the bias and racism at work at the time, said Noriega, a professor in the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of this seminal moment in the Chicano rights era and in the evolution of UCLA itself, this weekend the CSRC, in partnership with several campus departments, will look back at the student demonstrators' bravery and commitment to civil rights with a two days of events (RSVP required) at the Fowler Museum.

On Saturday, March 10, people who participated in the protests will join scholars to discuss what it was like to walk out of their schools back then. On Sunday, March 11, there will be screenings of the 1996 PBS documentary "Taking Back the Schools" and the 2006 HBO film "Walkout!" Producers Susan Racho and Moctesuma Esparza, will introduce their films and participate in a post-screening Q&A.

An exhibition of photographs, many from the Spanish-language publication La Raza (whose archives are housed in the center), and documents related to the walkouts will be on display at the Chicano Studies Research Center's library.

Carlos Manuel Haro, assistant director emeritus of the Chicano Studies Research Center, organized the weekend's events.

Haro was a third-year UCLA student at the time of the walkouts, and also an alumnus of Roosevelt High School in East L.A., one of the schools where students walked out in March 1968.

"The major change driven by the 1968 walkouts was within young Chicanas and Chicanos, including an awareness of self-worth, a motivation to educate ourselves and the community, and the understanding that we had to create change in education and all aspects of society," Haro said. "It changed a generation, and that generation caused change."

There is a direct connection between the walkouts and the subsequent establishment and flourishing of ethnic studies, he said. Inspired youth sought higher education, sought to write the histories of their communities, rather than have those histories written by someone else. These activists became the first generations of Chicana and Chicano studies and ethnic studies scholars, Haro said.

“With the expansion of educational opportunity, in some ways the growth and development of a Chicana and Chicano professional and middle class can be seen as a legacy of the 1968 walkouts and the social movement of the 1960s,” he said.

And there are broader ripples in the community. Parents and organizations began to emerge, demanding to be treated fairly and equitably.

“People of Mexican descent were no longer excluded from representation, and, in time, elected representation was also affected,” Haro said.

Conference organizers are keenly attuned to the fact that these commemorative events coincide with efforts of current students, who are preparing to participate in the “March for Our Lives” events planned for March 24 in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and other cities across America.

“The relevance of the history of the Chicano walkouts is that we are entering into another period in which youth are compelled to walk out in protest because their lives are endangered,” Noriega said. “The legacy is one of organized student activism in the face of neglect, discrimination and intimidation from the social institutions that are supposed to be caring for our nation’s children.”