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Remembering the Walkouts of '68

Exhibit at LA Plaza Explores the East L.A. Student Protests and Their Enduring Impact

By Nicholas Slayton Jun 28, 2018



The walkouts were prompted by poor conditions in East L.A. schools and alleged racist treatment from faculty. Students called for better schools and the creation of ethnic studies programs.

Oscar R. Castillo, courtesy of the artist

DTLA - Fifty years ago, high school students in East Los Angeles had had enough.

The students had been demanding better facilities, respect from the Los Angeles Unified School District, and an end to alleged racist treatment from some teachers and faculty. So on March 1, 1968, more than 15,000 students from seven schools walked out of class.

The protests galvanized the community and became part of a full year of unprecedented community activism. Now, five decades later, that moment in Angeleno and Chicano history is being celebrated at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes.



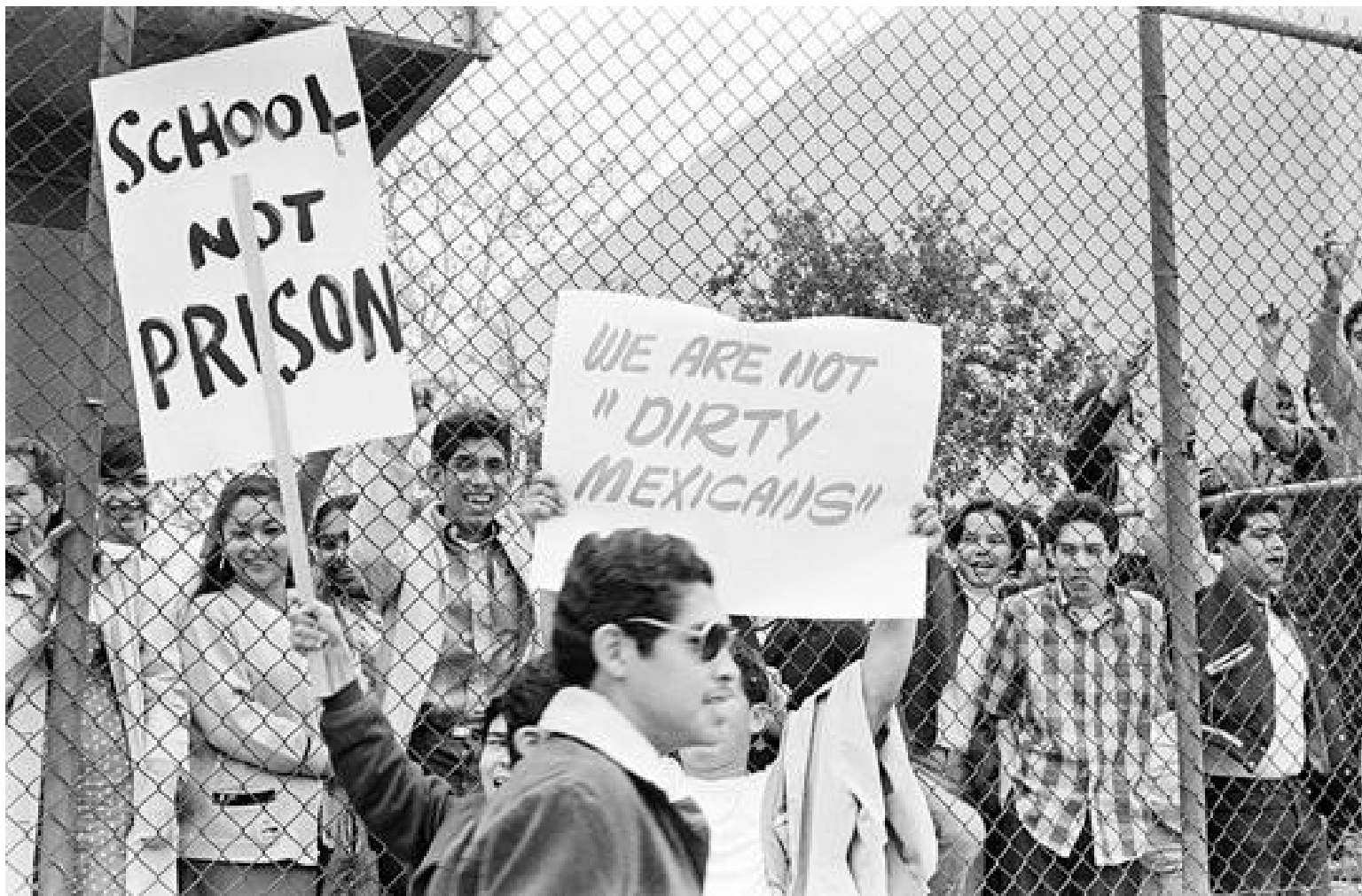
The recently opened ¡Ya Basta! exhibit at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes collects dozens of items from the 1968 East L.A. student walkouts. There are photos, flyers, the list of student demands and even FBI reports on the activists.

The exhibit ¡Ya Basta! The East L.A. Walkouts and the Power of Protest opened at the El Pueblo-area museum June 15 and runs through Jan. 14, 2019. It contains dozens of items related to the walkouts, including flyers, a school yearbook, petitions and reports on the conditions of the schools. There are videos as well as protest art inspired by the walkouts.

The show is intended to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the protests, but part of LA Plaza's goal is to get current students to see parallels between activism in the 1960s and the present, according to Senior Curator Erin M. Curtis.

"A lot of the work we did was about hopefully getting students to connect with the students from 1968," Curtis said. "It's why we have things such as the yearbooks, to put faces on it. In terms of the issues, a lot of it is the same. Students were facing police brutality in the way we're seeing it today. There are still problems in the schools that need addressing."

The protests began on that March day when the students walked out of school and rallied in the streets. The walkouts were centered around three schools — Roosevelt, Garfield and Lincoln high schools — but quickly spread throughout the community.



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Photo by Devra Weber, courtesy the photographer and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center © Devra Weber

The walkouts were in response to a series of grievances, but were instigated in part by the cancellation of a play at Wilson High School. Students walked out, and in the following days more people joined them. Activists later met with the school board and presented a list of demands. Protests continued throughout March, and a few rallies tied to the movement were held later in the year.

The exhibition fills two large rooms on the museum's second floor. Curtis and LA Plaza worked with an advisory board of people who participated in the walkouts to make sure all aspects of the protests were covered, and to track down items from the time.

A major part of ¡Ya Basta! — Spanish for “enough is enough,” and a rallying cry of student activists — is putting the walkouts, also referred to as the “East L.A. blowouts,” into perspective with what was happening around the world at the time. A section in the first room offers background on protests in cities both in the United States and around the globe. It touches on the assassinations that year of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

For Carlos Montes, a member of the activist group the Brown Berets, who joined high school students in the '68 protests, and one of the “Eastside 13” as they were dubbed by police, seeing the full picture of what was happening around the world is key to understanding the walkouts.

“In 1968 there was the student rebellion in France, and student protests at the Olympics in Mexico City in which they were massacred,” Montes told Los Angeles Downtown News in an interview. “There were the assassinations that took place that year.”



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Photo by George Rodriguez, courtesy of the artist

The second room in the exhibit explores the legacy of the walkouts and student activism over the years, including the present day. Banners and signs from the fight to protect recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (or DACA) program hang on the walls, as do photos of student activists from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 17 people were killed in February. The images show the students rallying for tighter gun laws.

Curtis said the plan was always to touch on present-day protests, but this part of the show was overhauled only a few months before opening in light of the walkouts organized after the Parkland killings.

“There’s so much resonance again. High school walkouts were used in good effect in 1968, and that protest strategy is being seized on today,” Curtis said.

One part of the exhibition is interactive, and looks like a classroom with desks and lockers. On a chalkboard, a timeline charts the gap between when students made their demands and the slow rate at which LAUSD implemented changes. Curtis said that ethnic studies classes, an end to corporal punishment and other changes were only enacted in the 1980s and ‘90s, decades after students rose up. Montes said that for the organizers of the protests, some things were relatively quick — a new school was built in 1972 — but other victories came much later, and some, such as Chicano studies programs, were watered down over time.

The classroom section was developed in part through conversations with current students at Roosevelt High School. Curtis said that while students there are politically active, many don’t consider themselves activists and feel like they can’t make much change. Thus, each locker bears an excuse, such as “Not enough time.” The lockers are designed to be opened, and inside visitors find a concrete action someone can take.

Montes said that students today are fighting for what they believe in, and hopes ¡Ya Basta! helps them learn about how similar movements fared.

“I hope they get a glimpse of the real history,” he said.

LA Plaza also has a series of programs tied to the exhibition, such as training teachers about the walkouts and a screening of the 2006 HBO film Walkout that dramatized the event, both on July 28. On Oct. 6, Montes and other veterans of the walkouts will discuss the protests and the struggles facing students today.

¡Ya Basta! The East L.A. Walkouts and the Power of Protest runs through Jan. 14 at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, 501 N. Main St. or lapca.org.

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