

Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front Veterans Support Arab American Studies

Fifty years ago, as members of the Black Student Union (BSU) and the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) of SF State and TWLF of UC Berkeley; we conducted the longest student strikes in US history to open educational institutions up to our histories, our cultures, and our communities as racially oppressed peoples. Out of this historic strike emerged the field of Ethnic Studies. As veterans of the BSU and the TWLF who sacrificed to breathe life into Ethnic Studies, we stand solidly behind the inclusion of Arab American Studies in California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum.

While the main protagonists within the TWLF were African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans, the spirit of the TWLF encompassed all those struggling against racism and colonialism. Arab and Muslim activists participated in and expressed solidarity with the TWLF strike. Both the Organization of Arab Students (OAS) and the Iranian Student Association (ISA) actively and unconditionally supported the goals of the SFSU strike in particular, and, the goal of decolonizing the curriculum in general. OAS and ISA shared BSU/TWLF opposition to the Vietnam war with the same unequivocal commitment to opposing US intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The destiny of Arab and Muslim students is intimately intertwined with our struggles. This was our commitment in 1968 and it remains our commitment today, as our histories illustrate. In California, we are slowly (and gratefully) recognizing that the United Farm Workers included Filipino and Yemeni workers as well as Mexican workers. The names of UFW founders Philip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong now proudly stand alongside Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. This history of struggle in the fields is even richer when we acknowledge that thousands of Yemeni laborers joined the fight for labor rights and dignity. The names of Arab Yemeni UFW organizers must now be learned by students in California schools to offer our students a more comprehensive education and tell the rich stories of our communities. The story of Nagi Daifallah, a young Yemeni organizer who was killed by a Kern County sheriff in 1973 as he defended Cesar Chavez must be taught to students to tell a more fuller history and to allow students of Arab origin to claim pride in their histories. The role of Saeed Mohammed Al-Alas and Ahmed Shaibi must be included in the valiant history of UFW along with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Philip Vera Cruz, Larry Itliong, to prevent part of that history from being erased.

These histories and solidarities between Indigenous, Black and Brown people, including Arabs and Muslims form the heartbeat of Ethnic Studies. They are timely and essential today as Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism become part and parcel of white supremacy, anti-Black racism and xenophobia and anti-immigrant violence. Understanding the Muslim ban alongside the caging of children and ICE raids offers a comparative lens through which Ethnic Studies has exemplified how to teach about the indivisibility of justice and the need for mutual understanding, dignity and respect. Imagining what it must feel like for Yemeni children whose parents are killed in indiscriminate bombings brings home the reality of Vietnamese, Central American, and Haitian kids and allows the student body to identify with one another. We must draw lessons of history from the 1968 strike as well as more recent times to bring our communities together, and confront legacies of hate, segregation, racism and ignorance. We note the messages of Jews of conscience who stood outside ICE and said,

“Never Again for Anyone,” as we learn from the Japanese community that demanded last summer not to repeat history. We are equally inspired by our members from Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) who drew on their lunch counter experiences and boycotts in the Jim Crow South and South African anti-Apartheid youth. In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. affirmed that justice is indivisible. In 2018, Angela Davis wrote, freedom is a constant struggle. As the murals honoring our struggles adorn our campuses, they remind us of how linked our lived experiences are and what we fought for in 1968.

As veterans of the student strike at San Francisco State and University of California, Berkeley, we stand solidly in support of the inclusion of Arab American Studies as part of the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum. It is a logical extension of what we fought for so many years ago: a relevant and liberatory education that will lead to a different world.

Signed:

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