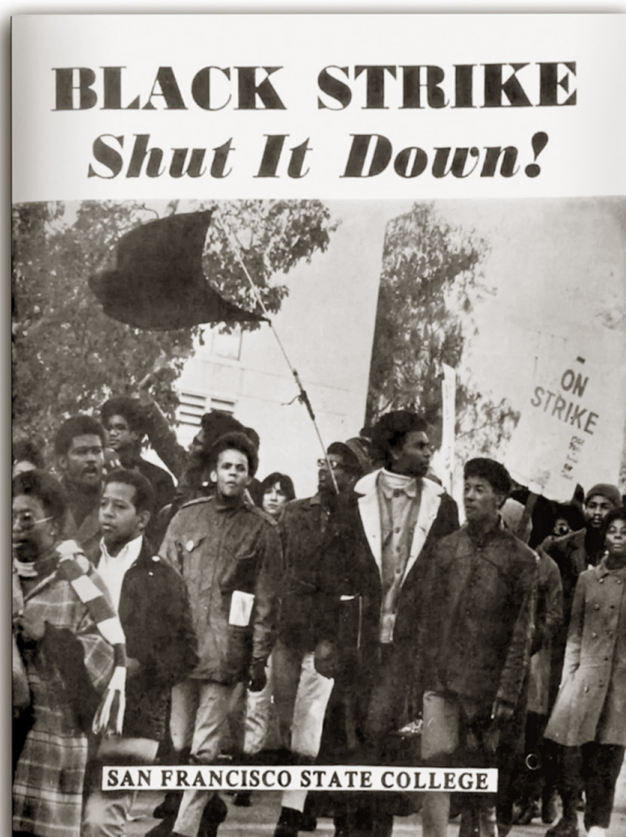


# San Francisco State College 1968: On strike, shut it down!

written by Clarence Thomas  
November 17, 2024



The author of this report, Clarence Thomas, head turned left, leading a picket line during the 1968 student strike. Others pictured include: Jo Ann Mitchell, Arnold Townsend, Robert Prudhomme, George Colbert, Jerry Varnado, and Sharon Jones.

*Following is an article by Clarence Thomas regarding the 56th Anniversary of the 1968 San Francisco State College Strike. On Nov. 6, 2024, the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University hosted a luncheon honoring veterans of the 1968 Strike that contributed to making the College of Ethnic Studies possible. The Strike, which lasted 5 months, was the longest student strike in U.S. history. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union played a significant role in the Strike. William "Bill" Chester, International Vice President of the ILWU, was part of the Select Committee, which was responsible for negotiating with student leaders to reach a settlement that resulted in establishing a Black Studies Department and a School of Ethnic Studies.*

On Nov. 6, 2024, the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University held a luncheon to commemorate the "56th Anniversary of the 1968 Student Strike," led by the BSU (Black Student Union) and the TWLF (Third World Liberation Front). I was invited to attend the luncheon as a veteran of the strike, whose activism, along with many others, contributed to the founding of the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State and the movements for Ethnic Studies nationwide.

### **History of the 1968 strike!**

The BSU initiated the strike. The strike started on Nov. 6, 1968, and ended on March 21, 1969, making it the longest strike by students at an academic institution in the United States. The strike had an intended revolutionary character because we,

the students leading the strike, “considered ourselves revolutionaries.”

This is how the U.S. government described the strike: *“One of the most effective confrontations in the history of the U.S. student movement, the San Francisco State College (SFSC) strike will no doubt serve as a precedent for future campus disruption. The strike has been unique in many ways. Differing completely from the events at Columbia University in 1968 or the recent disruptions at Cornell and Harvard. The SFSC strike witnessed the formation of new alliances, the use of new tactics, and the mobilization of unprecedented support. The effectiveness of the strike can be attributed primarily to the leadership of the SFSC Black Students Union.” \**

### **On strike, shut it down!**

The strike was initiated, as mentioned earlier, by the BSU. It was focused on challenging white supremacy in the curriculum of academia, specifically at SFSC, and creating a Black Studies Department as an alternative for Black students to increase the admission of Black students and students of color to the college.

The Central Committee initially had 10 demands which included:

- The establishment of a Black Studies Department.
- The hiring of Dr. Nathan Hare as its chairman with a full professorship, and with the Department’s ability to grant bachelor’s degrees in Black Studies.
- Open enrollment for Black students in 1969.
- That no disciplinary actions be administered to any students, workers, teachers, or administrators during and after the strike.
- That in the Fall Semester of 1969, all applications of non-white students be accepted.
- That George Murray, Minister of Education for the Black Panther Party, maintain his teaching position on campus for the 1968-1969 academic year.

## **The Third World Liberation Front!**

Members of the Central Committee of the BSU, led by Terry Collins, reached out to Mexican American student activist Roger Alvarado and many other third-world student leaders to organize the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF). This was truly a revolutionary concept that not only expanded the base of striking students but also put forward the demands of all students of color, circumventing the college administrators' attempts to divide and conquer. This was a wonderful example of building unity and working-class solidarity.

The TWLF demands included:

- That a School of Ethnic Studies be established, having the right to hire and fire any faculty member, director, or administrator.
- That 50 faculty be allocated to the School of Ethnic Studies, 20 of which would be for Black Studies.
- That in the Spring Semester, the College would fulfill its commitment to non-white students by admitting those who apply.

## **International Longshore & Warehouse Union (ILWU) supported the strike!**

During the student strike, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 1352 at SFSC "declared the first strike by faculty in higher education in California." The San Francisco Labor Council approved the strike sanction. The union struck to protest against racism at the college. The ILWU local leaders and members walked the picket line. Local 10 provided casual longshore jobs to faculty members, workers, and students on strike, demonstrating once again that solidarity is not an empty slogan and that "An Injury to One is An Injury to All."





This photo was taken in August 2024 at the memorial for Dr. Nathan Hare, the “Father of Black Studies.” Pictured are veteran activists of the strike: Hari Dillon, Pastor Arnold Townsend, Clarence “Buzz” Thomas, Professor Sharon Jones, Danny Glover and Dr Ramona Tascoe. Photo by Delores Lemon-Thomas.

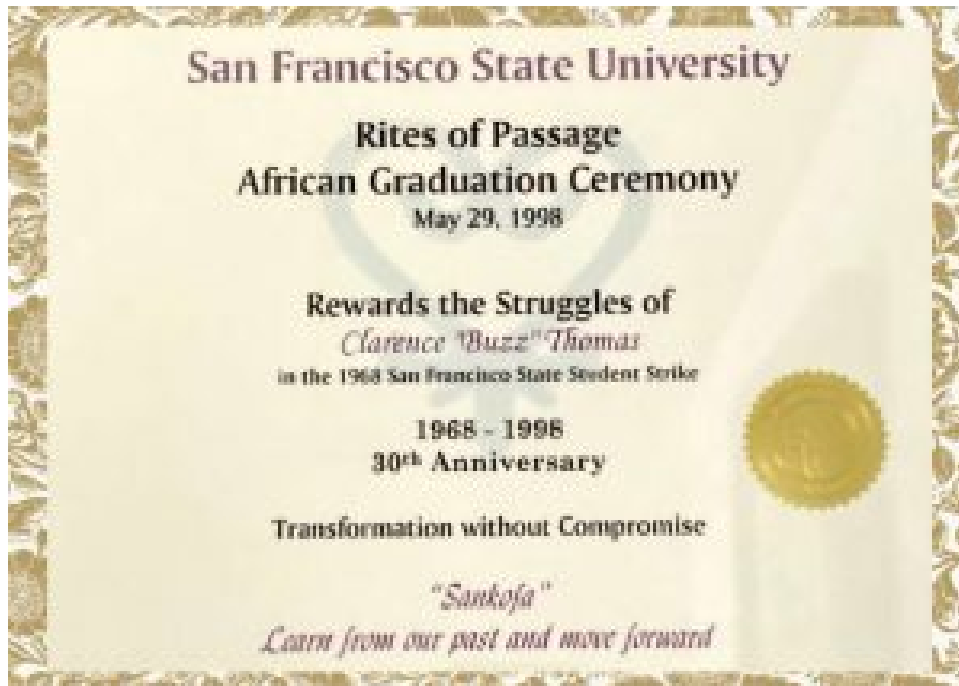
### **Lessons learned during the strike!**

I entered SFSC in the Fall of 1967. Two months later, I was facing expulsion and prison time for defending the rights of Black students to have self-determination and a voice on campus. This was the precursor to Nov. 6, “On Strike Shut It Down”! It was at SFSC that I learned the true meaning of “dare to struggle, dare to win.” How to organize and build coalitions. The importance of political education. How to write

a flyer, press release, and conduct a press conference — the importance of studying and applying what I learned into actual practice.

I can't fail to acknowledge the training and knowledge I received during my participation in the Black Panther Party during those years while active at SFSC. I could not separate those organizations or struggles. Recognizing and understanding the importance of international solidarity. One of the most important lessons of all was working to build alliances with the community.

The BSU had an off-campus center in the Black community. We also had the support of elders such as Dr. Nathan Hare and Dr. Carlton Goodlett, progressive physician, PhD, writer, entrepreneur, publisher, and leftist; Ronald V. Dellums, Berkeley City Council member in 1968; Willie L. Brown, attorney and California assemblyperson; Dr. Asa Davis, PhD, historian; Eileen Hernandez, president of NOW (National Organization of Women); and Rev. Cecil Williams, pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco.



## Conclusion

The “1968 Student Strike” ended in partial victory. The BSU and the TWLF agreed to settle the strike with the Select Committee of the administration. In 1969, a College of Ethnic Studies was founded, the first ever in the nation, composed of Black Studies, Asian American Studies, and La Raza Studies departments.

The striking students did not achieve an autonomous School of Ethnic Studies. We could not secure the hiring of Dr. Nathan Hare, whom we in the struggle refer to as the “Father of Black Studies,” because of how he put his academic career on the line during the 1968 Strike! He should have been the first Chairman of Black Studies. This, indeed, was no small loss. The demand for an increase in the admission of students of color led to the formation of the Educational Opportunity Program at all California State Colleges. There were over 700 students and other strikers who were jailed, brutalized, and terrorized by the San Francisco Tactical Squad.

Many of the veterans of the strike were unable to attend the 56th Anniversary luncheon, such as Pastor Arnold Townsend, who recently passed away and was in attendance at Dr. Nathan Hare’s Memorial in late August. I was determined to attend the luncheon, notwithstanding my own health issues. I am grateful to be among those represented for this momentous occasion.

In solidarity!

Clarence Thomas

Class of 1970, San Francisco State College, Member of the Central Committee  
Black Student Union;  
International Longshore & Warehouse Union Local 10 retired;  
Co-founder DeClare Publishing

Author:

- “1934: A Year of Good Trouble - Million Worker March Anniversary,” 2024
- “Cleophas Williams: My Life Story in the International Longshore & Warehouse Union Local 10,” 2023
- “Mobilizing in Our Own Name: Million Worker March,” 2021

[www.millionworkermarch.com](http://www.millionworkermarch.com)

\* Excerpted from: Riots, Civil and Criminal Disorders, Hearings before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress- first session (part 22) pg. 571.”

