

BIOGRAPHY



Emma Tenayuca

“Although she worked as a labor organizer, she described herself as a community activist.” That is how one labor-history specialist has characterized Emma Tenayuca who began her career as a social activist at the age of 16.

As you read, think about what impelled Emma Tenayuca to struggle for workers’ rights.

Emma Tenayuca, born in San Antonio in 1916, was a Texan through and through. Her mother was a member of the Cepeda family, one of the first Spanish families to settle San Antonio in the early 1700s. Her father was a Native American from South Texas. Emma grew up with a strong social conscience and a drive to help working people.

At age 16, her sympathy with the workers’ plight drew her into a strike against the Finck Cigar Factory. Strikers, mostly women, had staged a walk-out demanding fairer pay, as called for in National Recovery Administration (NRA) directives. For her trouble, young Emma was tossed in jail. Soon after her release, she helped to establish a chapter of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union in San Antonio. Then she turned most of her energies toward the Workers Alliance of America, which was affiliated with the Communist party. Her work for this group included staging demonstrations to demand jobs for Spanish-speaking people. She also wrote many letters to Washington to try to get New Deal funds channeled to the needy in San Antonio.

In the mid-1930s, Tenayuca became aware of the plight of San Antonio’s pecan shellers, who were mainly of Mexican heritage. Exploited as a cheap source of labor, “workers were crowded elbow to elbow on long wooden benches without backs, and little attention was given to sanitation,”

stated one report. Wages were so low—\$2.73 per week—“that entire families had to work at pecan shelling in an effort to obtain the minimum amount of food and shelter for survival,” said another report. Despite these shocking conditions, shelling plant owners announced in 1938 that they would lower wages still further.

The pecan shellers went out on strike, with the backing of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), part of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Because she held a leadership position in the UCAPAWA, Tenayuca was supposed to lead the strike. But the CIO, uneasy about her Communist connections, replaced her. In response, the strikers named Tenayuca their honorary strike leader in recognition of the assistance she had given them.

Two years later, when the Soviet Union signed an alliance with Germany’s Adolph Hitler, Tenayuca was shocked, and she abandoned her Communist sympathies. She resigned from the Communist party, but her old ties to the party made it difficult for her to find work. During World War II, she finally found a job sewing military uniforms. Following the war, she enrolled in college and after earning a master’s degree, she began a new career as an elementary school teacher in San Antonio.

Questions to Think About

1. (a) What evidence supports the statement that Emma Tenayuca had a very strong social conscience? (b) How was she punished for her association with the Communist party?
2. **Formulating Questions** What questions could you ask Emma Tenayuca to gain a better understanding of her political beliefs during the 1930s?