

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Emma Tenayuca, Labor Leader, 1916-1999

Emma Tenayuca was just 16 years old when she joined a strike of women cigar makers. Born in San Antonio in 1916, she grew up hearing fervent political debate at Plaza del Zacate. "If you went there, you could find a minister preaching. You could also find revolutionists from Mexico holding discussions. I was exposed to all of this."¹

By 1937 Emma was leading sit-down strikes at City Hall and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters. Her fiery speeches inspired crowds of workers. In January 1938, when pecan shellers in San Antonio walked out of their jobs, they turned to Emma for support. She immediately joined their cause, rallied thousands, and was arrested along with many others. The shellers won a favorable settlement to the strike, but many lost their jobs soon afterwards to mechanization.

In 1939 the young leader was meeting with Communist Party members inside the new municipal auditorium. A crowd stormed the building, smashing windows and causing injuries. Blacklisted by employers, Emma moved to California and stayed for many years. In the late 1960s, she returned to San Antonio, where she earned a master's degree and taught reading in public schools.

Today Emma Tenayuca is remembered as *La Pasionaria* for her fierce defense of the working poor.



Quotations

*It was a combination of being a Texan, being a Mexican, and being more Indian than Spanish that propelled me to take action. I don't think I ever thought in terms of fear.*²

*It's the women who have led. I just have a feeling, a very strong feeling, that if ever this world is civilized, it would be more the work of women.*³

Photo

ITC *San Antonio Light* Collection #1541E. Caption: "Emma Tenayuca leads Workers Alliance members at a sit-down protest in San Antonio City Hall, 1937."

Endnotes

¹ Emma Tenayuca, address to 12th Annual Conference, National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies, Austin, 1984, reprinted in *La Voz de Esperanza* 12:7, September 1999, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ Emma Tenayuca, interview with Jerry Poyo, February 21, 1987, Oral History Program, Institute of Texan Cultures.