



## Emma Tenayuca

### Labor Leader

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*Emma Tenayuca (1916–1999) was a Hispanic labor activist, organizer, and humanitarian in Texas, best known for leading the pecan shellers strike in San Antonio in 1938.*

**E**mma Tenayuca was born on December 20, 1916, in San Antonio. Her mother came from one of the oldest Spanish families in the city, and her father was a Native American from South Texas. Tenayuca, one of 11 children, grew up in her grandparents' house on the west side of San Antonio, not far from her parents' house.

**Early Exposure to Labor Issues** Tenayuca was first exposed to the struggles of the working class while accompanying her father to the Plaza del Zacate, a public square where poor Mexican working families would gather on weekends to socialize, play games, and discuss politics. The discussions were often about the revolution in Mexico, and the politics tended toward socialism, communism, and anarchism (wanting no government). These discussions affected Tenayuca strongly. In high school, she started reading books by Russian authors Karl Marx and Leo Tolstoy.

At the age of 16, Tenayuca joined her first strike, at a cigar factory. She was jailed for her participation, but that only made her more determined.

**A Natural Leader** At the strike, Tenayuca met Mrs. W. H. Ernst, who was involved with the Communist party. Together they formed the Texas branch of the Workers Alliance, an organization for the many workers who were unemployed due to the Depression. It became apparent that Tenayuca was a natural labor leader. Around this time, she married Homer Brooks, the leader of the Texas Communist Party. In 1939 Tenayuca became the chairperson of this party.

During the Depression, San Antonio was a huge national center for pecan shelling. It was in the middle of the Texas pecan-growing region and had a large supply of poor Mexican immigrants who were willing to work hard for low wages. The working conditions were terrible. The tuberculosis rate in San Antonio at

the time was nearly three times the national average and was likely the result of pecan shellers' breathing in the fine dust of the cracked pecans.

**The Pecan Shellers' Strike** When the companies decided to cut the shellers' pay, about 12,000 of them decided to go on strike. They called in 21-year-old Tenayuca to lead them. The pecan shellers' strike brought Tenayuca into the national spotlight. The national press wrote articles about the strike, and Tenayuca appeared in *Time Magazine*. However, because her communist politics hurt her public credibility, she was replaced as the strike leader. The strike was eventually successful, and a national minimum wage law was soon passed that guaranteed workers more money.

As a high-profile Communist leader, Tenayuca was blacklisted in San Antonio and left to find work in Houston and then San Francisco. In the 1960s, she returned to San Antonio and taught reading in a local school district. Emma Tenayuca died in 1999 at the age of 82.

### Review Questions

1. How did Tenayuca first become interested in politics and labor issues?
2. Why was Tenayuca replaced as strike leader in the pecan shellers' strike?

### Critical Thinking

3. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did listening to Mexican workers as a youth inspire Tenayuca to fight for labor laws?