

La Pasionaria: the Passion and Legacy of Activist Emma Tenayuca [part I]

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following article is a two-part series researching the question: What is Emma Tenayuca's legacy and how could she have impacted the Chicano movement without being acknowledged? La Voz includes this article as part of the celebration of Latino Heritage Month in September and the upcoming Raza Unida reunion, a high point of the Chicano movement. It will take place in San Antonio in September.*

On a chilly February morning in 1934, a sixteen-year-old girl stands proudly in front of a cigar factory in San Antonio, Texas, alongside one hundred other women, mostly poor and Mexican-American like herself. They are protesting the factory's low wages and unsanitary working conditions, demanding justice. The girl, a high school senior, feels a sense of unity and empowerment; a thrill runs through her as she realizes that, together, she and the women are making an impact, forcing the powerful factory owners to listen to their demands. She shouts protest slogans, and the voices of the crowd join together to become a roar. The policemen approach, ready to arrest the strikers, but the girl is not afraid. She does not know it, but this is the moment her life changes: young Emma will become a great leader whose fight for justice will one day be the subject of history books, poems, museum exhibits, artwork, and even a Mexican-style corrido.

Emma Tenayuca, the American-born daughter of Mexican immigrants, is one of the most significant labor organizers in the 20th century, and the impact of her work left a blueprint for her successors in the Chicano/a and labor movement for generations to come. Born into a society that treated Tejanos as second class citizens with few job opportunities and inhumane working conditions, her inherent passion for justice and equality- inspired by anarchists as well as the Finck Cigar Strikers- prompted her to lead the Pecan Shellers' strike of 1938, one of the largest labor strikes in Texas. She galvanized Mexican-American laborers (women in particular) to fight for their rights and speak out against systems of oppression, despite the risk of deportation. Due to her effectiveness, however, Tenayuca and her radical visions were greatly disliked by authorities, causing her to flee Texas and move to California under an alias. She remained unrecognized throughout the main years of the Chicano movement, but, later, when Chicano students became academics and

looked back upon Mexican-American history, they re-discovered and celebrated her contributions. While she was forgotten, Emma Tenayuca's groundbreaking activism on behalf of Mexican Americans in the early 20th century created a blueprint for organizing strategies that made the Chicano movement successful.

Emma Tenayuca was born on December 21, 1916 in San Antonio, Texas. She had strong Texan roots: her mother, Benita

Hernandez Zepeda, was a descendant of the Zepeda family that helped found San Antonio during Spanish rule in 1685, and her father, Sam Tenayuca, was an Amerindian Southern Texan. Emma was the eldest of eleven children, and (due to economic hardship) was sent to be raised by her grandparents. Her grandfather was a carpenter, a hardworking man and devout Catholic. She grew up on the Westside- an integrated and impoverished community- where the church was the point of union amongst her Black, German, Italian, and

Mexican neighbors.

Tenayuca's family was interested in politics and civil rights. Growing up, she and her grandfather would go on walks to La Plaza Del Zacate, a square in downtown San Antonio. The square was the center for activity, where groups (mostly Mexican) would gather and talk. Radios existed at the time, but were expensive, so Tenayuca would get her information by going to the plaza and listening to the people around her. She would overhear bible preachings, political conversations, and readings of newspapers about the latest news from Mexico. There was a growing anarchist movement in Mexico during the 1920's which spilled into San Antonio, and there was always talk about the movement. The plaza was packed on the weekends, and anarchists took the opportunity to speak to the crowds- an eager Tenayuca would listen.

One of these groups was the Magonistas, supporters of the Flores Magon Brothers. Ricardo, Enrique, and Jesús Flores Magon were Anarchists and advocates of radical reform in Mexico during the leadership of dictator Porfirio Diaz from 1876 to 1911, known as the Porfiriato. They founded the newspaper "Regeneración" in 1900 to amplify the voices of those being exploited under Diaz's policies. Ricardo and Jesús were imprisoned multiple times, and then fled to Texas in 1904 and continued to publish their paper. They established the Mexican Liberal Party, a formal resistance organization, to challenge the Porfiriato. The brothers advocated land and labor reform in their writings, with an audi-



The Brackenridge High School debate squad above with Emma Tenayuca far right. Below, she is pictured on the team front row 2nd from the right. The squad competed successfully throughout Texas. Source: Dept. of Speech, La Remata Yearbook, 1934 (not part of original article).



Finck cigar strikers, 1933

ence of exploited workers in Mexico.

Alongside Magonistas, the Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) grew in popularity. The movement was founded in 1905, and focused on unskilled laborers (factory workers, farm workers, domestic servants), seeking to bring together all laborers to create “one big union” and to get rid of the capitalist system. Wobblies were opposed to wage labor, and their goal was syndicalism (a system in which workers own the industries), in order to bring the working class economic power and control. The group rejected conventional collective bargaining and instead relied on direct methods- strikes, boycotts, propaganda, and even violence.

Tenayuca’s exposure to these radical groups kickstarted her passion for activism and social justice. Once the Great Depression hit, her grandfather lost everything in the Wall Street crash of 1929 and in the failure of the banks in 1932, which greatly affected her and her family. Five to six thousand banks closed their doors. The capitalist system was collapsing, leaving millions of Americans unemployed. In high school, she was a part of discussion groups about the Great Depression, and she knew she needed to take action.

The Finck cigar strike prompted Tenayuca into action, and was her official entrance into the labor movement. She had heard about the strike from the newspaper, and was drawn to the movement, as it was one of the first women-led strikes. Finck Cigar company employed more than 500 workers by the 1930’s, mostly Mexican women. The strike began as Ed Finck took over his father’s company. Working conditions were inhumane: girls earned from \$2-\$7 per week, they were not allowed to change their clothes when they went to lunch, they couldn’t take breaks for over four minutes at a time, and because of economic crises, they were subjected to speedup in the work. For every one cigar that didn’t meet the standard, rollers had to roll three “penalty cigars” unpaid and Finck would sell these cigars regardless, labeling them as “imperfect,” a loophole to avoid paying the laborers. By 1933, labor complaints had risen, and workers went on strike.

The first of the strikes, led by workers W. H. Ernst, Adela Hernandez, Modesta Herrera, and E.J. Padilla, lasted for thirty days. The group unionized, and formed a local chapter of the International Cigar Workers Union. Around one hundred strikers picketed the factory beginning at 6am every day, to ensure that others wouldn’t take their jobs. The mayor of San Antonio intervened, and proposed an agreement that Finck would improve working conditions and rehire the strikers if the strike leader did not return to work. The union accepted, but Finck ignored the agreement, only allowing a few strikers to go back to work while most of the other protesters were dismissed, and working condi-

tions remained the same.

Almost one year later, the workers struck again, now accompanied by sixteen-year-old Tenayuca. In anticipation of assault from the police, strikers placed one hundred of their “most militant and fearless union members” on the picket line. Their picket line was broken up by sheriff’s deputies, and two-thirds of the strikers were arrested- including Tenayuca. The women were particularly vulnerable because they were Mexican immigrants, many of them undocumented, so they faced the additional risk of deportation. Deputies invaded the homes of the workers, using violence and making dehumanizing comments, and threatening to call immigration officials, even if they were born in the United States. The strike eventually collapsed, and although workers still refused to go back to work, the women were easily replaced by the growing number of unemployed Tejana women in San Antonio who were desperate for jobs. Although outwardly a failure, the strike did succeed in paving the way for Tejana laborers to fight for their rights.

Inspired by the women of the the cigar strikes, garment workers at children’s clothing company Dorothy Frocks struck against their company shortly afterward. Tenayuca helped establish two local International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) chapters, and assisted in the organization of the strike. The Texas garment industry was growing in the 1930’s, as more skilled Mexican women sought jobs. Over 15,000 Tejana needleworkers sewed for fifteen hours per day underpaid, which brought about protest. Shortly after Tenayuca’s involvement, she found herself at odds with the ILGWU leadership, feeling that they did not fully understand the needs of the Latino community.

The Tejana cigar and garment strikers received little support, only from the Westside neighborhood and pro-union forces. Tenayuca joined the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) during the strikes, but quickly left the organization as they made limited efforts towards helping the workers, and chose to focus on preparing children for learning English in school and getting Mexican-born documented residents to apply



Emma Tenayuca by Melanie Cervantes from www.dignidadrebelde.com



Tenayuca in Bexar county jail