Emma Tenayuca

December 21, 1916 - July 23, 1999

"La Pasionaria de Texas"

Emma Tenayuca was called "La Pasionaria de Texas" because of her passionate eyes, her brave and passionate leadership and her fiery passionate speeches in defense of Mexican workers in depression-era Texas. She was born on December 21, 1916 in the west side of San Antonio. For most of her younger years, Emma lived with her grandparents in order to relieve the burden on her father and mother who had eleven children. She graduated from Brackenridge High School in 1934 and immediately entered the working world as an elevator operator.

Emma Tenayuca's world view and political ideology was shaped by two major historical events which were The Great Depression and The Mexican Repatriation. As a young person she liked to visit La Plaza del Zacate where unemployed workers and families would meet, socialists would give speeches on the plight of the workers and discussions would take place on how to organize.

When the Great Depression hit, times were difficult for all workers but much worse for Mexicans. At an early age of 16, and while still in high school, Emma began organizing workers and by 1934, at age 18, she had already helped form locals of the Ladies' Garment Workers Union. This same year Emma organized a strike by Mexican women workers at the Finck Cigar factory of San Antonio and because she was the leader, she was arrested. During the Finck Cigar strike, Emma Tenayuca met Mrs. W.H. Ernst and both formed an organization for the unemployed workers called the Workers Alliance. Three years later, Emma was general secretary for ten chapters of the Workers Alliance. During this time, Emma Tenayuca and the Workers Alliance protested vigorously the beatings of immigrants by the Border Patrol and fought for a
minimum wage, for the right to strike, for equal rights for immigrant workers and against deportations. The great suffering of Mexican workers during the depression and the deportation of thousands through repatriation compelled Emma Tenayuca to join the Communist Party in 1937. Through the party, Emma met Homer Brooks, the Chairman of the Texas Communist Party and they married in 1938. In 1939 Emma Tenayuca replaced her husband as the Chairperson of the Texas Communist Party.

The party allowed Emma to undertake bigger struggles for the Mexican workers. During this time, San Antonio was the pecan capital of the United States and the industry was making big profits. Most of the workers were Mexican and they performed extremely difficult work from sun up to sun down at extremely low wages. Men dug ditches and the workers who shelled and processed the nuts were women. The women made five cents a day for toiling in horrible conditions. When the "bosses" lowered the daily wage to 3 cents a day, Emma Tenayuca led 12,000 of the Mexican women pecan shellers out on strike on January 31, 1938. The strike lasted for several months. Intimidation was used to keep other workers from joining in the work stoppage. Strikers were tear gassed several times, and police were deployed to prevent the strike from being effective. Trivial charges were brought against strikers, and over a thousand striking workers were arrested and jailed in city and county jails. The San Antonio pecan-shellers' strike was a virtual uprising by the most downtrodden workers. It shook the city and the state and significantly empowered the workers. Police threw 1,000 strikers, including Tenayuca, into jail, but they could not hold back the struggle. Tenayuca later said, "What started out as an organization for equal wages turned into a mass movement against starvation, for civil rights, for a minimum-wage law, and it changed the character of West Side San Antonio." As the mass movement gained momentum, the "bosses" felt threaten and Emma Tenayuca began receiving death threats. Emma Tenayuca was a fiery speaker and on August 25th, 1939, she was scheduled to speak at the Municipal Auditorium of San Antonio. As she began speaking, approximately 5,000 rioters stormed into the auditorium, throwing rocks and bricks and many were injured as they scattered. By a miracle, Emma was able to escape to safety, but she was hounded by death threats long after the riot. Members of the Ku Klux Klan then went to the home of the mayor and tried to kill him and his family for granting Emma Tenayuca a permit to use the municipal auditorium.

After the riot Emma was blacklisted in San Antonio. The bosses hounded, harassed, and threatened her with death. Unable to obtain work and afraid for her life, she fled to Houston, Texas and eventually to San Francisco, California. Emma Tenayuca had already divorced Homer Brooks when she was forced to leave San Antonio. In 1952 Emma received a teacher's certificate from San Francisco State College. During this time she gave birth to her son Frank T. Adams. She did not return to San Antonio until the late 1960's. In San Antonio, she was never forgotten by the Mexicanos of the west side. She was given a heroine's welcome. She continued serving the community as a teacher in the Harlandale School District for many years and earned a master's degree in education from Our Lady of the Lake University in 1974. Emma eventually retired in 1982 and died July 23, 1999.

Today, Emma Tenayuca's call to action still echoes in San Antonio. Her image--striding in front of a line of marchers or standing at a microphone shaking her fist as she stirred the strikers to struggle on--inspires the oppressed workers of San Antonio to this day.

At her funeral Emma Tenayuca was eulogized by hundreds of her friends and her loved ones offered pieces of metal in tribute because they said she was made of steel. Writer Carmen Tafolla read a poem at her funeral mass. One stanza read:

"La Pasionaria, we called her, because she was our passion, because she was our heart---defendiendo a los pobres, speaking out at a time when neither Mexicans nor women were expected to speak at all."
Emma Tenayuca leading a 1937 Workers Alliance Demonstration on the steps of San Antonio's City Hall.
Source: http://aztlan.net/default6.htm