

TENAYUCA, EMMA (1916–1999)

The radical labor organizer and visionary *curandera*, Emma Tenayuca, was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1916. Exposed to the poverty and hardscrabble life of the city's West Side, Tenayuca joined the labor movement when she was sixteen. By the early 1930s she had founded the city's International Ladies Garment Workers' Union Local and joined the executive committee of the Workers' Alliance. The pecan shellers' strike of 1938 solidified Tenayuca's reputation as a labor activist earning her the honorific name, "la pasionara" for her dedication. She urged a walkout, and on Monday, January 31, 1938, between 6,000 and 10,000 workers, the majority of whom were women, walked out in protest. Police used tear gas to dispel the crowds and arrested more than 1,000 strikers on trivial charges such as obstructing the sidewalks. City officials, the Catholic Church, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) condemned the strike, although many middle-class Mexican Americans professed sympathy for the pecan shellers' appalling working conditions and meager wages. In time opponents labeled Tenayuca as a communist for her class struggle activism and ideology. Anti-union and anti-Mexican sentiment forced her to leave Texas in the late 1940s for her safety. She moved to San Francisco, and graduated magna cum laude from San Francisco State College. Twenty years later she returned to San Antonio and found that she had acquired heroine status. She enrolled at Our Lady of the Lake University, where she earned a master's degree in education and taught in a San Antonio public elementary school until her retirement. She died of Alzheimer's disease on July 23, 1999, at a San Antonio nursing home.