

Investigating Emma Tenayuca and the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938

In this lesson, you will read both primary and secondary sources to investigate the questions:

- How does a labor strike happen?
- What is special, or particular, about the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938?

Part 1: Watch a story.

To-Do

- Go to: [Source A: Emma Tenayuca, Labor Leader](#)
- Watch the video. (The video has no sound)
- Answer Prompts A & B below

Prompt A: What questions do you have about Emma Tenayuca or the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938?

I want to know....

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Remember: [Primary sources](#) are the raw materials of history — original documents and objects which were created at the time under study. They are different from [secondary sources](#), accounts or interpretations of events created by someone without first hand experience.

Prompt B: Was the video you just watched a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

Part 2: Learn more about Emma Tenayuca and Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938

To-Do

- Complete the Stop and Source below

Stop and Source: Before reading, notice the origins of each source.

- **Source B**: An excerpt from Felipe Ibarra, "The Pecan Slaves of Texas", 1932.
- **Source C**: Excerpts from historian Zaragosa Vargas', "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66 no. 4 (1997).
- **Source D**: Emma Tenayuca, Letter to San Antonio Pecan Workers, December 25, 1938

	<i>Date of Publication</i>	<i>Primary or Secondary Source?</i>	<i>Consider perspective: Based on the source information, I think the author might....</i>
Source B (Ibarra)			
Source C (Vargas)			
Source D (Tenayuca)			

Part 2 cont.		
To-Do: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read Source B (Ibarra), Source C (Vargas), and Source D (Tenayuca) and answer questions about each below. 		
Source B (Ibarra)	Your answer	Evidence (information or quotes) that support your answer
Who are the workers in Ibarra's account?		
What were the working conditions of Pecan workers in 1932?		
Source C (Vargas)	Your answer	Evidence (information or quotes) that support your answer
What strategies did the strikers use?		
What was the significance of Emma Tenayuca's participation in the strike?		

Part 2 cont.		
Source D (Tenayuca)	Your answer	Evidence (information or quotes) that support your answer
What did Tenayuca see as key to the success of the pecan workers' strike?		
According to Tenayuca, what did the strike accomplish?		
Continue to Parts 3 & 4 below		

Part 3: Synthesize and Argue

To-Do:

- Write a paragraph to answer the following:
 - o **How does a labor strike happen?**
 - o Use the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938 as an example and evidence (information or quotes) from the documents to make your argument.
 - o Consider: What is special, or particular, about this strike?

Part 4: Learn More

To-Do

- Watch this [trailer](#) for a documentary about the Pecan Shellers' Strike of 1938.
- Visit [UTSA Digital Collections](#) to explore photos, interviews, and more.

Appendices

Source B: An excerpt from Felipe Ibarra, The Pecan Slaves of Texas, 1932

...There are about one hundred fifty or more hell holes called pecan factories, scattered all over San Antonio in the Mexican neighborhoods among the Mexican workers...We have a law in our great state that you can't work a woman longer than nine hours. Though you can pay her as little as you wish...

...Tomasita Macias, a young smart American-born girl, works in pecan factory as a limpiadora (to clean the nuts you must be fast and have very good eyes) five days a week, from 6 in the morning till 7 at night, with only a half hour for lunch....wages \$3.00 a week. I asked her why she doesn't quit the job? "Father I out of work, the children are little, I must, must work to help save them..."

Source: A Worker Writes: Felipe Ibarra, The Pecan Slaves of Texas (1932).

Retrieved from The University of Texas, Arlington Special Collections, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of America-CIO: Texas Locals, Folder AR36-1.12.

Source C (Vargas): Tejana Radical

On Monday, January 31, 1938, between 6,000 and 8,000 workers from more than 170 of the small pecan-shelling plants walked out to protest a pay cut, bad working conditions... The walkout [protest] shut down the plants so that fewer than 1,000 workers showed up for work. ...the pecan shellers prepared to challenge their employer through picketing and demonstrations. Each confrontation swelled the size of the crowds, producing fear of a mass uprising. The workers unanimously elected [Emma Tenayuca] the honorary strike leader, but she had opposition as well. Police quickly arrested her ...on charges of communist agitation.

While Tenayuca sat in jail, demonstrations took place at nearby parks and downtown... Workers...held meetings in lots next to the pecan-shelling sheds. Women formed the majority of strikers...The strike brought many women out of their homes and into the streets for the first time. Adapting to their new role as strikers, the empowered women persuaded their husbands and children to come to the rallies, where they could be educated about the issues...

...Following Tenayuca's instructions, picket captains told the pecan shellers not to make eye contact with the police, and they ordered those strikers sick with tuberculosis not to spit on the ground. Such acts could be...violations of city ordinances and would result in arrests... The picketers...devised methods of resistance that exploited weaknesses in police...including blowing out the tires of police cars by throwing tacks on the streets and vandalizing shipments of unshelled pecans... Women strikers went to jail accompanied by their children... Because of ...hunger, some shellers went to jail willingly in order to be fed. When the incarcerated strikers protested against overcrowded conditions, jail keepers turned fire hoses on them. Such acts failed to break the strikers' spirits. At night, the jailed but jubilant strikers sang Spanish renditions of "We Shall Not Be Moved" and "Solidarity Forever," along with Mexican labor songs.

Tenayuca devoted much time and effort in helping feed the families of the jailed strikers... She remained adamant [determined] about the union. Repeatedly explaining to Mexicans how their lives could be improved through unionization...San Antonio's West Side Mexicans filled the streets to hear her rail [complain] angrily against the Southern Pecan Company and the city bosses. The open-air meetings drew an average attendance of 5,000 pecan shellers.

Source: Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66 no. 4 (1997): 553-580.

**Source D: Emma Tenayuca, Letter to San Antonio Pecan Workers,
December 25, 1938**

Dic. 25, 1938

Compañero Salud:

Extiendo un saludo muy fraternal a todos los miembros de la UCAPAWA y les deseo un [feliz] año nuevo. Al mismo tiempo los felicito por la gran victoria que acaban de ganar, me refiero al contrato recientemente firmado por Seligmann con la Unión.

El año pasado vio gran luchas de las masas Mexicanas de los estados de Texas y Nuevo Mexico. Podemos decir que la huelga de los obreros de la Nuez de San Antonio estableció el unionismo [militante] entre las masas Mexicanas. Esta fue la primera huelga que ha visto San Antonio, que sobre todos los obstáculos que puso la Administración de la Ciudad, siempre TRIUNFO. TRIUNFO POR LA DETERMINACION DE LAS MASAS MEXICANAS...

La Compañera Emma Tenayuca
Chairman del Partido Comunista de Texas

Dec. 25, 1938

Greetings Comrades:

I extend a very fraternal greeting to all UCAPAWA members and I wish you a [happy] new year. At the same time, I congratulate you on the great victory you have just won, I am referring to Seligmann's recently signed contract with the Union.

Last year saw great struggles from the Mexican masses of the states of Texas and New Mexico. We can say that the strike of the pecan workers of San Antonio established the [militant] unionism among the Mexican masses. This was the first strike that San Antonio has seen, that in spite of all the obstacles that the City Administration used, SUCCEED. VICTORY BECAUSE OF THE DETERMINATION OF MEXICAN MASSES ...

Comrade Emma Tenayuca
Chairman of the Texas Communist Party

Source: Letter from Emma Tenayuca to the Pecan Shellers of San Antonio Texas, Dec. 25, 1938. Retrieved from The University of Texas, Arlington Special Collections, The George and Latane Lambert Papers, Folder AE127-27.9.