

A strike and an uprising [in Texas]

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I was very impressed with Friday's fine cut screening of session **B.7 "A strike and an uprising [in Texas]": an experimental telling of the pecan shellers strike of 1938 led by Emma Tenayuca and the 1987 Jobs with Justice march of 3,000 in Nacogdoches**. The screening which included wrap around comments by Anne Lewis, University of Texas at Austin Chair & Commentator: John Weber, Old Dominion University

This session presented is a rough cut of this film, which tells the stories of two struggles that **connect labor rights and civil rights**.

The first part was about the uprising of pecan shellers of San Antonio and the CIO 1938 strike, while the second was that about service workers struggle against Stephen M. Foster University in the 1980s.

The film and interviews are attentive to the process of how people made their unions into a force for civil rights justice. It makes a metanarrative about memory and forgetting that speaks to the limits of chronology.

The film includes rare footage of Emma Tenayuca, the Communist Party Mexican-American activist who was such a pivotal part of the 1938 uprising. We hear Emma singing the Marseilles and see interviews with people who knew her and how she was part of a community of struggle. The film does not flinch at Emma's association with the Communist Party. Emma was involved in a Cigar Strike and the unemployed work before the 1938 struggle, and the film makes clear that she was trained in a trans-border community that was a diaspora of the Mexican revolution. San Antonio was part of this political ferment.

The most abused and low-wage pecan workers share their painful memories that connected the limits of their life -living without electricity, with bloody, swollen fingers (the memory of hands works throughout this section), with low levels of food, "considered just like we were some other kind of race of persons," -with the lack of power and being abused. It also considers the transnational sources of rebellion, hinting at how the CP had built some cross-border organizing through this section of the film; the Chief of Police is quoted: "I wasn't stopping a strike, I was stopping a revolution."

The pecans were mechanized and San Antonio became the bastion of military contracting after the 1940s, but the film suggests that the past is like a river and that struggle continues. The second part of the film covers the struggles to bring justice for service workers at Stephen M. Foster University in Texas. These stories, of a San Antonio where poor people lived among the military industrial complex, are also powerful. Perhaps most powerful was the way that the university overcame Title VII laws - university personnel circled the N in Equal Opportunity on the university applications to quietly refuse to hire or to allocate jobs to African Americans (N for negro) even after 1964. The university managed to avoid paying minimum wage to service workers through similar subterfuge. Emma, who was exiled in California and mostly forgotten, appears as a speaker at a rally in this struggle in a 1980s march.

The audience was full of compliments for this film. Asked how she had funded the film, Lewis mentioned that the fact that it dealt with Tenayuca meant that funding was difficult, and she was denied application for a grant because of the power of that radical organizer.

I can't wait for this film to be completed and available. I will be using in my classes, include introduction to US history classes. The way that it uses memory and struggle, how it connects 2 seemingly disparate struggles in a similar theme of union and civil rights was brilliant. Bravo!

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