

Latin Heritage Month: Remembering Luisa Moreno

Written by David Kopp | September 1, 2026

Each year, the United States observes National Hispanic Heritage Month from September 15 to October 15. The observance began as a week in 1968 and expanded to a month in 1988. It gives us plenty to celebrate: rich traditions, music that makes our hips get into a groove, and delicious food we cannot get enough of! Those are all great reasons to enjoy the world's diversity. Still, we should also remember the courage that helped make today's cultural exchange possible. There are too many heroes and heroines to cover in one article, so today we are remembering Luisa Moreno, a Guatemalan-born labor and civil rights activist whose work began in the 1920s!

As a young woman in Guatemala, Luisa founded La Sociedad Gabriela Mistral. The group pushed for women to be admitted to universities. Opening those doors would have been a job well done for most people, but it was only the beginning for Luisa. She moved to Mexico City, worked as a journalist, and then moved to East Harlem in New York City. There, she became a seamstress.

Dismayed by the working conditions, Luisa wasted no time joining La Liga de Costureras, a group connected to the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. She soon decided the union was not doing enough for Latina workers. Wanting a more active role, she accepted a position with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), where she organized Black and Latino cigar workers. Once again, she became frustrated by an organization's unwillingness to fully support workers of color.

Unshackled by her circumstances, Luisa joined the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). The union was a better match for her tenacity. She organized workers across several industries, fought for higher wages and better conditions, and helped secure on-site daycare for women workers. At the same time, she helped organize El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (Spanish-Speaking People's Congress), which brought together more than 100 groups to fight segregation, discrimination, and other civil rights abuses.

Her work directly improved the lives of thousands of workers and people of color. Then the Red Scare took hold in the late 1940s. During this period, government agencies and political committees investigated people they suspected of having communist ties. Luisa's past connection to the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), along with her rallies, strikes, and political work, came under intense review. According to Luisa, officials offered her citizenship if she testified against labor leader Harry Bridges. Otherwise, she faced

deportation. She refused to betray a fellow organizer and left the United States under a deportation order in 1950.

They could force Luisa out of the country, but they could not snuff out her movement. She helped lay the groundwork for civil rights leaders who followed. There are times when life calls us to do something bigger than ourselves. For Luisa, that calling lasted a lifetime. Her story reminds us that even when the benefit is not ours to reap, the work can still be worthwhile!

“Strange things are happening in this land, and only when the truth is widely known, can we put a stop to them.” - Luisa Moreno