

Migrant labor
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THE PUERTO RICAN FARM LABOR PROGRAM ; 4

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A STUDENT OF ECONOMIC HISTORY must feel, as he hears of the conditions of seasonal farm workers today, that labor relations on the farm are generally about a century behind those in industry. Labor legislation, for farm workers is somewhat more advanced -- it probably lags only 25 to 50 years behind -- but to a large extent its advance is made meaningless by lack of enforcement. So far as labor organization in the fields is concerned, we must retrace our steps to before the turn of the century for a comparable period among urban workers.

The Puerto Rican government had to face this situation during the drastic labor shortage after World War II. Puerto Rico was found to be an excellent source of supply for farm workers since the seasonal demand for sugar workers in Puerto Rico begins to drop as the demand for farm workers in the United States begins to rise. Private employment agents began to swarm to the island. Many collected from the worker and the employer, and they either ran the air transportation themselves or they collected their commission on that too. Many times they also sold suitcases, heavy clothing, etc. Obviously, there was little consideration for labor, for employers, or for the communities into which the workers were being trans-

ported. The present Puerto Rican farm labor program is an outgrowth of an investigation of the situation made by the Hon. Fernando Sierra Berdecía, Secretary of Labor of Puerto Rico, in 1946. It was obvious to the Puerto Rican government that it could not allow their people to be brought to the States either to be exploited directly or to be used to threaten what little advance had been made in establishing decent farm labor standards for local people.

The legal device used to help protect labor standards for both Puerto Rican and local labor was one utilized for entirely different purposes by most Southern states -- permission to recruit farm labor is given only under certain conditions. The conditions are contained in a statement of standards in the form of an agreement which is signed by the worker, the employer, and the Secretary of Labor of Puerto Rico. Since January 1949, orders for workers from Puerto Rico are accepted only if they are received via the established clearance procedures of the United States Employment Service.

The agreement contains about 30 paragraphs; it is given to both worker and employer in both English and Spanish. Many farmers at first were bitterly opposed to signing the agreement but overwhelmingly they have come to see that it helps increase worker satisfaction and therefore productivity. I shall mention only the highlights:

A minimum agreement for 13 weeks of work must be signed with a guarantee of 160 hours of work (or pay) in each four-week period;

Prevailing wages for the area for the same or comparable work are required;

Workmen's compensation coverage must be provided, even in states in which there are no workmen's compensation laws for farm workers;

"Adequate and hygienic housing" must be supplied, at no cost to the workers;

A ceiling is placed on the cost of meals provided to the worker by the employer;

A schedule of deductions is provided in the agreement in case the farmer has advanced the cost of transportation;

A group sickness, accident, and income-maintenance policy is provided for the worker on a "check-off" basis;

The employer is required to furnish the worker a statement of his earnings, hours worked, deductions, withholding, etc, with his pay;

Field representatives of the Migration Division of the Department of Labor of Puerto Rico are entitled to inspect the employer's records and to have access to the farm to consult the workers;

Next I should like to quote Article VII-A verbatim:

"The Worker shall not be subject to discrimination in employment, housing or any other regard because of race, color, creed, membership in or activity in behalf of any labor organization."

The employer posts a bond to help assure performance under the agreement.

Workers transported from Puerto Rico under the agreement have increased from 2,000 in 1948 to between 14,000 and 15,000 in recent years. Furthermore, working under the agreement has become a schooling period for thousands of Puerto Rican workers. They get to "know the ropes" and then many of them come on their own, or they establish steady working relationships with an employer and return year after year to him, without the intervention of the employment services and the Migration Division. In the past few years, the "free-wheelers" have almost equaled the agreement workers.

The Division tries to be of service to them also, in case of need, but finds itself handicapped if the Puerto Rico Department of Labor has not approved the agreement under which the man comes to work.

Real improvement has been brought about, but further major advances can be made only if we can count on the more enlightened farmers themselves, upon the local, state, and regional employment services, upon the churches and other civic groups, and upon the labor movement.

We are proud of the commendations we have received because the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is the only unit in the American system of government which has ever tried in this way to protect both its own workers away from its area and the labor standards of other workers also. But our efforts affect only a relatively small proportion of the total number of seasonal farm workers in this contry, who face continued widespread exploitation, insufferable housing conditions, dangerous transportation arrangements, and a pervasive feudalistic attitude toward the people who cultivate and harvest the food for our tables. A nationwide remedial program of both legislation and citizen action is urgently needed. We hope our experience may be helpful in bringing it into being. It certainly can count on our hearty participation.