

# Puerto Rican Labor

## Migrant Hiring System Poses Problem for US, PR

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THE PRESS has recently been filled with articles about the subject of curtailing alien migrant labor in favor of Puerto Ricans.

Spokesmen for the Government of Puerto Rico, the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Puerto Ricans of New York City, have requested the United States Department of Labor to ban foreign contract labor as long as Puerto Ricans were available for the jobs.

The fact is, Puerto Rico is and shall continue to be for many years an economic problem to the United States. Approximately 2,200,000 people live on this island 100 miles long and 35 miles wide, which has a population density of about 620 people to the square mile. If the same proportion of people inhabited the United States, we would have over two billion souls or the entire world's population, concentrated in this country.

When we note that close to 80 per cent of the families on the island have an annual income of \$500.00 or less, and that the majority of products there come from the mainland and are sold at prices higher than in the United States, the unfortunate economic situation is easily apparent.

Puerto Rico has an average annual unemployment total of 70,000 people.

Its chief industry is sugar, and many of the workers on the plantations and mills are unemployed for a great part of the year.

The Insular Government is making a brave attempt at remedying domestic conditions by encouraging the establishment of new industries, but it is clear that this can never solve the entire problem. Thus, the Government of Puerto Rico has been casting about for other means of improving the lot of Puerto Ricans.

**PUERTO RICO'S EYES** are now focused on the jobs of more than 11,000 British West Indians who come into the U.S. seasonally as farm laborers. The majority of these work in the Southern and Northern states along the eastern seaboard. In addition, thousands of migrant Mexican workers are imported each year to work in the Southwestern states, but these have not been involved in the recent controversy.

The main arguments advanced by the proponents of employing Puerto Ricans run along these lines:

1. They are citizens of the United States and as such are entitled to first consideration in getting jobs.
2. The United States has a direct economic stake in Puerto Rico; therefore, anything that can be done to help Puerto Ricans get employ-

ment and be self-supporting will in the long run redound to the benefit of the American taxpayer.

3. Politically, the advantage of being American citizens can be exploited in gaining the support and cooperation of the Puerto Rican people by showing them preferential economic treatment.
4. Puerto Ricans might be encouraged to spread throughout the United States instead of concentrating in the City of New York, where many are victims of slum living.

On the other hand, the principal reasons given for maintaining the present system of importing alien contract labor are:

1. They have been accustomed to working here for many years and any exclusion of them will tend to arouse resentment against the United States at a time when we are trying to build harmony in the Western Hemisphere.
2. Many of the British West Indians work in certain of the southern sections of this country under conditions and for wages that would be unacceptable to the Puerto Ricans, and to the Government of Puerto Rico, that must pass upon all employment of contract labor from Puerto Rico.
3. We have a large British West Indian population residing in the United States, and particularly in New York City, and any curtailment of work for their brethren will antagonize them.

Some additional points should be considered. Firstly, the masses in Puerto Rico are racially democratic. There is relatively no prejudice among the Negroes and whites there, and consequently, any employment obtained for them in the United States, even on a temporary basis, should not in any way disrupt the customs, mores and racial experience of this group. Secondly, minority groups in the United States are facing grave problems today, and nothing should be done that might tend to inflame one against the other at a time when unity is more than ever required.

**HOW, THEN,** can this problem best be solved? Chiefly, by bringing together representatives of all the important elements involved and working out a plan that will be satisfactory to all of them.

In New York City, for example, the Puerto Rican population is contiguous at many points with large numbers of people who come from the British West Indies. They must learn to work together in establishing a fuller democracy and combating any evidences of discrimination. New York's Puerto Ricans and West Indians are vitally interested in arriving at a solution of the

migrant labor problem that will make for harmonious relations among themselves. Undoubtedly, in this connection, there must be give and take. Compromises will have to be made on a fair and just basis, and narrow national priorities will have to be overlooked in reaching toward greater goals.

The Puerto Rican Government is, of course, very much concerned with this problem. The island is overpopulated. It suffers from large unemployment. It must grapple with solutions and naturally will try to get as many jobs for its inhabitants as it possibly can. It should, of necessity, realize the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with the British West Indies, both from the larger standpoint of the interests of the American Government and from the smaller viewpoint of harmony for the Puerto Rican population. It is to the advantage of the latter to cooperate in finding a means of permitting the maximum number of Puerto Ricans to be employed without creating enemies for the Puerto Rican people.

The Government of the British West Indies is also, naturally, directly concerned with this problem. Economic conditions, on the whole, are very poor in their islands and it is not surprising that they look with favor upon the employment on a migrant basis of many of their farm laborers in the United States. West Indian Government officials, however, ought to understand that it does a great deal of harm to have their countrymen work under conditions that depress economic levels.

**THE GOVERNMENT** of the United States is also directly involved in this question. Puerto Rico is a delicate political problem and almost anything done in connection with it is met by great pressure from one source or another. The advocates of independence, statehood and dominion status, and the Puerto Rican Nationalists, are always interpreting in their own way anything done relative to Puerto Rico or the Puerto Rican people. In the last analysis, the United States, through its Department of Labor, has to make the decisions which control the admission of migrant farm labor, but this should be done after due consideration is given to all of the factors and due hearing to all of the parties concerned.

Last, but not least, the farm employer must have a definite say in regard to the people that he employs. No decision should be reached without getting his point of view.

In conclusion, at the earliest possible moment a joint meeting should be arranged between representatives of the Puerto Rican population in New York City, the British West Indian people of New York, the Government of Puerto Rico, the Governments of the various countries of the British West Indies, the United States Department of Labor and farm employer groups. Otherwise, the frictions growing out of the importation of farm labor can develop into serious discord between minority groups in the United States, and between the federal government and the West Indian and Puerto Rican governments.

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