Sponsored Migration

Meléndez, Edgardo

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Meléndez, Edgardo. 
Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States. 
The Ohio State University Press, 2018. 
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CHAPTER 3

Puerto Ricans as Domestic Workers
and the Farm Placement Program

THE PUERTO RICAN government’s approval of the migration law in December 1947 signaled its intent to advance organized migration as a solution to the perceived major problem of the island: overpopulation. Once the decision for this policy was made, the government began to explore programs and ideas that could facilitate the movement of people out of Puerto Rico. This issue became an important part of the government’s policies and its day-to-day affairs even though concerns like economic development and status politics dominated the government’s public agenda and the public’s attention.

This chapter discusses the Puerto Rican government’s actions to advance the employment of Puerto Rican labor in the United States. Many U.S. employers preferred foreign workers who could be deported after their work was complete. The Puerto Rican government intervened with federal agencies and agricultural employers in the United States to encourage them to use Puerto Ricans workers. The government’s claim was based on the status of Puerto Ricans as “domestic labor,” with preferential treatment over foreign workers. The notion rested, of course, on their U.S. citizenship. The debate on Puerto Ricans as domestic labor illustrates how the privileges of citizenship—like having priority over alien labor—was not a given for these colonial citizens.

The chapter also discusses the Puerto Rican Farm Placement Program (FPP; also known as the Farm Labor Program), one of the most significant projects of Puerto Rico’s migration policy. This program illustrates the role of
the colonial government as a provider of labor to U.S. agricultural employers and places the government at the center of the movement of labor from the island to the U.S. mainland. The FPP remains the best example of an organized migration by the Puerto Rican government. But this program was also based on the notion that these migrants required special protection from the Puerto Rican government because, as a consequence of their racial and cultural characteristics and their place of origin, they were not acknowledged as U.S. citizens with a right to work and settle in the U.S. mainland.

Lastly, the chapter addresses the government’s migration plans to Latin America. Although migration to the United States became the accepted course of action after 1947, the Puerto Rican government kept exploring other possible migration sites for Puerto Ricans, specifically countries in Latin America. This should be understood, among other things, as an attempt by policy makers to deal with the continuing “Puerto Rican problem” in the United States. But U.S. government institutions like the State Department constantly opposed these proposals of planned migrations to Latin America because it would have involved the mass movement of U.S. citizens to foreign countries. This is one more instance where U.S. citizenship largely oriented the migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States.

By examining the issue of Puerto Ricans as domestic labor and the FPP, one can understand more clearly the role played by the Puerto Rican government in migration and how it used citizenship as a tool to move forward its migration policy. This topic can also illuminate how U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans on the island or in the U.S. mainland was reexamined in post-war Puerto Rico.

PUERTO RICANS AS DOMESTIC LABOR

The government of Puerto Rico began to foster the orderly migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States after approving the migration law in December 1947. The government’s FPP was aimed at not only selecting workers in Puerto Rico but also placing them where labor was needed. Island policy makers sought to move Puerto Rican migrants away from New York City and place workers in areas where they would be welcomed. But as President Harry Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor concluded, there was ambivalence among many American employers and some U.S. policy makers regarding Puerto Ricans: they were accepted as workers to satisfy immediate labor demands in agriculture, but they were not accepted as community members. Many employers were reluctant to hire Puerto Ricans because, as U.S.
citizens, they could not be deported at the end of their contract and were not as docile a labor force as foreign workers. For many years, Puerto Ricans were characterized by U.S. government officials and employers as “foreign workers” and had to compete with Mexican and West Indian labor for jobs in American agriculture. This situation became an important obstacle in the Puerto Rican government’s effort to promote migration to the United States.

The issue of Puerto Ricans being accepted as domestic labor in the United States places U.S. citizenship in the middle of the island’s migration debate. Some scholars argue that while citizenship is not the only thing that distinguishes Puerto Ricans from other “immigrants” in the United States, it is the one advantage Puerto Ricans have when it comes to their entry and incorporation into American society. But citizenship was not immediately acknowledged for these migrants, either from agricultural employers who preferred foreign noncitizen workers or from the federal government agencies in charge of supplying labor to U.S. farms. For Puerto Ricans at this time, citizenship was a contested area, one that had to be fought for in order to have spaces open for them to work in the United States. The colonial nature of Puerto Ricans’ U.S. citizenship became a central issue in the migration project. Puerto Rico’s status as “foreign in a domestic sense” applied to Puerto Rican labor as well: although citizens, these subjects were deemed by U.S. employers and by the federal government as foreign to the domestic labor market. The colonial state assumed the representation and protection of its “citizens” in the United States, confronting labor-related agencies within the metropolitan state with the right of these subjects to have job priority on the mainland as U.S. citizens.

The confusing positioning of Puerto Ricans regarding U.S. citizenship became evident in the report by President Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor. It acknowledged that

Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens and that from the standpoint of citizenship, it is inappropriate to discuss Puerto Ricans in a chapter dealing with contract aliens. However . . . since they now find themselves in competition with alien labor, there is obviously a functional relationship which requires their being considered in this context.

After examining the Puerto Rican government’s policies on migration and the reasons for the U.S. Bureau of Employment defining them as domestic labor in 1949, the report indicates another peculiarity of Puerto Rican labor migration to the United States. Because Puerto Ricans are citizens, their employment “does not require negotiation of work contracts or prior certification of labor shortage” as alien labor does. It then adds that, nevertheless, “in its
desire to protect its citizens as much as possible, the Puerto Rican government has insisted on both work contracts and certification of labor needs before approving recruitment of its people. The Puerto Rican work contract is negotiated between farm employers on the mainland and the Puerto Rican Department of Labor, as other foreign government do. The report acknowledged that even though Puerto Rican farmworkers were U.S. citizens, they were still treated as alien workers and that, furthermore, in order to minimize the hardships they faced on the U.S. mainland, the Puerto Rican government took care of “its citizens” like the Mexican government did: by requiring a contract, by negotiating directly with employers, and by requiring a certification of labor needs in order to authorize the movement of labor to the United States.

By 1950, Puerto Rican farmworkers were already part of the class of agricultural workers in the United States known as “migratory farmworkers,” in large measure due to the policies of the Puerto Rican government under the FPP. In 1940, there were about one million domestic migrant workers, a figure that decreased during the war as the number of alien workers increased. After the end of World War II, according to President Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor, the number of migrant workers increased again to one million, out of which “domestic migrants represent only about one half. The other half is made up of approximately 100,000 Mexicans legally under contract, a relatively small number of British West Indians and Puerto Ricans, and by far the most important, illegal Mexican workers who in recent years have amounted to an estimated 400,000.” The commission, like other agencies of the U.S. government dealing with the management of the agricultural labor force, had trouble acknowledging Puerto Ricans as part of the domestic labor force, even though one of its recommendations was to have them recognized as such, with preference over foreign labor.

Puerto Ricans were in a disadvantaged position compared to foreign workers when the war ended since one “of the outstanding features of the wartime labor program was the neglect of Puerto Rico,” according to President Truman’s commission. The reason for the neglect of Puerto Ricans during this period “was the reluctance of farm employers to accept Puerto Ricans.” According to statements made during hearings by the president of a Florida growers association, “The vast difference between the Bahama Island labor and the domestic, including Puerto Rican, is that labor transported from the Bahama Islands can be diverted and sent home if it does not work, which cannot be done in the instance of labor from domestic United States or Puerto Rico.” According to the president’s commission, the “demand for migratory workers is thus essentially twofold: to be ready to go to work when needed; to be gone when not needed.” As U.S. citizens, Puerto Rican work-
ers presented a dilemma to the farmers and their communities who did not want them to stay.

By 1947, Congress had ended the recruitment of foreign workers under a federal program to assist American agriculture. The Puerto Rican government lobbied the Division of Territories and Island Possessions of the U.S. Department of the Interior in vain to have the program reinstated and applied once again to Puerto Rico. Division officials nevertheless encouraged the Puerto Rican government to develop their own migration program to the mainland to alleviate the unemployment problem on the island. Raymond Barr, chief of the division’s Caribbean branch, suggested sending Puerto Ricans workers to California, where there was a dire need of farm labor, and recommended that the Puerto Rican government make direct arrangements with the farmers’ associations and visit the farms to examine the working conditions there.

Puerto Rican policy makers consistently complained about the refusal of U.S. government agencies and agricultural employers to give priority to Puerto Rican workers over foreign workers, citing it as a major impediment to the success of their migration program. On February 10, 1949, Sierra Berdecía’s intense lobbying efforts resulted in an agreement with the director of the Bureau of Employment Security, Robert Goodwin, to have the U.S. Department of Labor declare Puerto Ricans part of the U.S. domestic labor force with preference over foreign workers. The agreement stipulated that the movement of island workers to the United States would be through the U.S. Employment Service (USES). U.S. employers were required to request workers from their local USES office; if the office certified that no local workers were available, the request would be sent to the Puerto Rico office, which would do the screening and preselection of workers to be hired by the U.S. employer. This agreement specified that Puerto Rican workers would go only where there was a certified need for labor, that they would not displace local workers, and that their wages would be the prevalent ones in the area—that is, that they would not depress wages in the United States. However, the agreement was not strongly binding for the federal agency, demanding only that U.S. employers be advised that there was Puerto Rican labor available if they desired it, and allowing employers to hire foreign labor if hiring Puerto Ricans caused them “undue hardships.”

The Puerto Rican government had to keep lobbying U.S. agencies for many years after the 1949 agreement in order to protect Puerto Rican workers against foreign competition for jobs in the United States. This is evidenced in an August 1949 memo from Sierra Berdecía to Governor Muñoz Marín, where he commented on a bill to empower the Federal Security Administration to coordinate the contracting of foreign labor in order to supplement domestic
labor in the United States. He questioned the bill’s alleged purpose, arguing that the “use of foreign workers who are already in the United States results in discrimination against domestic workers particularly Puerto Ricans who are classed as domestic workers.” He suggested that the term “domestic labor” “be defined . . . to include those workers in the mainland as well in the territories and possessions on the United States [sic].” Sierra Berdecía charged that “not enough of an effort has been made to secure domestic labor of which there is an abundant supply in Puerto Rico.”

On October 21, 1949, Resident Commissioner Fernós-Isern, along with labor advisors Alan Perl and Estella Draper, met with USES officials in Washington to discuss the issue of West Indians competing for jobs with Puerto Rican workers in the Northeast. The Puerto Rican delegation expressed their dissatisfaction with the number of Puerto Ricans employed in relation to the high number of foreign workers contracted that year. USES officials stated that the resistance to hiring Puerto Rican workers was due to the employers’ reluctance to have a labor contract—which other domestic workers did not have—and the need to advance transportation expenses to island workers, as required by the island government. According to Draper’s memo, USES director Robert Goodwin stated that “congressional opinion was that the Puerto Ricans might stay in this country and create an unemployment problem, and therefore foreign workers should be allowed in.” Fernós-Isern explained that Puerto Ricans on the island or the mainland were U.S. citizens who needed protection. He advanced his intention to convince the New York congressional delegation to favor “a policy of excluding foreign workers in favor of Puerto Ricans. He would explain to the congressmen that Puerto Ricans will migrate to New York City, unless other sections of the country are opened up to them.”

In January 1950, another Puerto Rican delegation composed by Perl, Draper, and José Cabranes, from New York’s Migration Office, met in Washington with USES officials and representatives of agricultural employers. All farm interests present there defended the use of imported labor. According to Draper, Perl indicated that the Puerto Rican government was “willing to negotiate the contract to fit the need of employers in particular areas. (Despite this invitation, not one single member approached us at the end of the meeting).” Draper concluded that “it was the unanimous opinion of the group that the use of foreign labor should be continued,” giving USES “ample justification for the use of foreign workers and resisting any attempts to place Puerto Rican labor.” Perl’s assessment of the meeting was harsher, calling it a “disgusting spectacle . . . a regular love-fest with all the employers cheering the performance of the USES and ending up saying we love you, we love you, we love
you.” He proposed taking a more active approach, including lobbying mem-
bers of Congress to put pressure on Labor Secretary Tobin, getting support
from American labor unions, and encouraging the governor of Puerto Rico
to be more active on this issue.16

The judgment of USES by the Puerto Rican functionaries was in agree-
ment with the conclusions presented by Truman’s Commission on Migratory
Labor. Its report reasoned that the displacement of domestic labor by foreign
workers could be reduced or even eliminated

by separating the employment service function for domestic workers from
the administrative responsibilities for contracting and importing foreign
labor. When the agency which certifies a labor shortage also is the agency
which fills that shortage by importation, it is much too easy to offset an inef-
fective recruiting and placement job at home by importing more workers
from abroad.17

USES director Goodwin rejected the accusations of conflict of interest raised
by the commission’s report, arguing that the needs of agribusiness had to be
taken into consideration and that foreign labor fulfilled a demand for labor in
American agriculture.18 The influence of big agribusiness on U.S. labor policy
and its reluctance to restrain the use of foreign labor is reflected in the fact the
even after the president’s Commission on Migratory Labor urged ending the
use of alien labor, Congress did not put an end to this practice.19

Despite a 1950 memo from Labor Secretary Tobin insisting on the need to
hire island workers, opposition to the use of Puerto Rican labor by U.S. labor
agencies and agricultural employers continued. The memo itself was con-
fusing. Tobin maintained that USES must give preference to domestic labor
when possible, but added: “If and when domestic workers on the continent are
insufficient to meet agricultural needs, preference should be given to the use
of our citizens from Puerto Rico.”20 Puerto Ricans were again differentiated
from other “domestic workers.”

Perl’s advice for U.S. policy makers to pressure Tobin on the use of Puerto
Rican labor was apparently followed. For example, Raymond M. Hilliard,
chairman of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Puerto Rican Affairs in New
York City, questioned Tobin regarding why West Indians were still employed
in agricultural jobs when large number of Puerto Rican citizens on the island
and the mainland—particularly in New York City—were unemployed. “The
fact that 90% of migrating Puerto Ricans locate in the City of New York com-
pels our interest in this matter,” he stated.21 In April 1950, efforts by the Puerto
Rican government led to an agreement by the U.S. Department of Labor and
the state of New York to bar the use of West Indian labor in that state; the agreement explicitly benefitted Puerto Rican workers.22

The aggressive campaign by the Puerto Rican government to procure employment for its migrants in American agriculture raised concerns among several groups. Some labor organizers declared Puerto Ricans to be aliens displacing the domestic African American agricultural workers, while others accused the Puerto Rican government of racism for its campaign to substitute Puerto Ricans for West Indian labor.23 Sierra Berdecía justified the latter policy on the basis that West Indians depressed wages for American workers, and that Puerto Ricans should work in the United States as a right of citizenship. He contended that admitting foreign workers “is not only an invasion of the rights of citizens but also the perpetuation of a serious American unemployment problem.24

Citizenship became instrumental in the government’s migration policy after it began framing Puerto Ricans’ status as domestic labor as a right of their U.S. citizenship. The fact that U.S. federal and state agencies and employers refused to recognize Puerto Ricans as citizens or acknowledge their right to work as domestic labor with preference over foreign labor led the Puerto Rican government to fight these institutions for the recognition of these migrants as U.S. citizens. Puerto Ricans’ U.S. citizenship did not automatically guarantee them access to the U.S. labor market; citizenship was not a given, but something that had to be sustained and affirmed in the United States, in this case by the Puerto Rican government. If the U.S. citizenship of Puerto Ricans is a colonial or territorial citizenship that was constructed during several decades by U.S. congressional legislation, Supreme Court decisions, and executive polices, then by 1950, the colonial state was immersed in the process of using and redefining the meaning of that citizenship for Puerto Ricans to make policy and to extend the rights of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens on the mainland. The PPD, which years earlier had briefly supported Puerto Rico’s independence, was now compelled to use American citizenship as an important tool to make migration possible, particularly after migration became an integral part of its social and economic development program. Once migration and Operation Bootstrap became central policies of the PPD government in 1947, U.S. citizenship became essential to the projects of modernization and state control. Citizenship was the fundamental basis for the Commonwealth constitution approved in 1952. The capacity to have Puerto Ricans move to the United States and the making of migration as a state policy certainly played a role in this new perspective by the PPD.

Correspondence between Sierra Berdecía and Tobin shows how the Puerto Rican government insisted that the U.S. government give priority to
Puerto Rican labor. Sierra Berdecía expressed his concern about statements by Tobin regarding the employment of Puerto Ricans only if they were on the mainland. He insisted that “Puerto Ricans as American citizens are entitled to every right that citizenship confers them regardless of whether they live in San Francisco, New York, Boston or San Juan.” Sierra Berdecía indicated that “although it has never been our idea to displace foreign workers, we do not want to be displaced ourselves” and argued that if twenty thousand West Indians working in the United States were replaced by “American citizens living in Puerto Rico, .285 per cent of the United States unemployment situation in this Island would be alleviated.” Tobin replied to Sierra Berdecía that his statement was only to reaffirm that island workers in the United States “are entitled to the same rights and privileges accorded to any other citizens,” and that such differentiation did not constitute a “distinction as to degree of citizenship status.” He affirmed, however, that “it is desirable to concentrate on job placement of unemployed workers within the State before turning to distant sources for filling requirements.”

In September 1950, Congress created the U.S. Bureau of Employment Security with the passing of the Wagner-Peyser Act. The bureau’s functions were extended to the island after the Puerto Rican legislature approved its local implementation in December. In February 1951, the Puerto Rico Employment Service, affiliated with USES, was created by the island government. The extension of the Wagner-Peyser Act to Puerto Rico, which Sierra Berdecía called “the most important event in the Employment and Migration Bureau during the fiscal year 1950–51,” no doubt was the result of, among other things, the lobbying and political maneuvers of the Puerto Rican government during the previous two years. This law provided Puerto Rico with federal funds to operate the Bureau of Employment and Security (BES) within the Bureau of Employment and Migration (BEM). Consequently, the BEM was divided into two separate programs: BES and the newly restructured Migration Division, financed with funds from the Puerto Rican government. As Joseph Monserrat stated, the Wagner-Peyser Act “expands Puerto Rico’s job market to areas beyond the island and it clearly established that Puerto Rico’s work force is part of the U.S. domestic labor force.” The act incorporated Puerto Rico into the national employment system and the labor interstate clearance system. It allowed the employment of foreign workers only when domestic labor was unavailable, as established by the U.S. Department of Labor. As part of USES, local state offices were urged to hire Puerto Rican workers when there was a certifiable need of labor. Because of these efforts, according to Sierra Berdecia immediately after the act was approved, “our Employment and Migration Bureau is receiving an increasing number of orders for agricultural workers.”
As the statistics for the Farm Placement Program indicate, the number of Puerto Ricans working in agriculture increased dramatically after 1952.

Nevertheless, the Puerto Rican government had to continue lobbying in the United States to convince federal labor agencies to enforce the priority employment of Puerto Rican workers. This was true even after the approval of the Wagner-Peyser Act, and even after the report by President Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor, which recommended in its conclusions that when facing labor needs, “preference be given to citizens of the offshore possessions of the United States, such as Hawaii and Puerto Rico,” given the continued preference for alien labor by agricultural employers. This issue came to the fore again when, in the spring of 1951, Congress began to discuss the Ellender-Poage bill that allowed the use of Mexican braceros and undocumented workers in American agriculture. This bill not only reflected the power of agribusiness in U.S. politics but also openly contradicted the recommendations of Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor. In May 1951, Sierra Berdecía met with Goodwin, who had been recently appointed by President Truman to assess the manpower needs during the war, to urge him to enforce the employment of Puerto Ricans based on the fact that they were U.S. citizens and Puerto Rico was the only region in the United States with a declared surplus of labor.

Still, by 1952, Secretary of Labor Tobin was hesitant to defend the use of Puerto Rican labor in American agriculture. In a letter to Hubert Humphrey from the Senate Labor Committee during hearings on the status of migratory labor in the United States, Tobin noted that several factors prevented further use of Puerto Rican labor on the continent, including the island’s distance from agricultural areas where labor was needed, the difference in language, and the limitations imposed by the government of Puerto Rico on the recruitment of island labor through its labor contract. During a previous Senate hearing Senior, director of the Migration Division, had urged the approval of strict limitations on the use of alien labor in the United States, arguing that as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans must have preference over foreign labor. Discrimination against the use of Puerto Rican labor in agriculture continued through the 1950s. For example, in 1958, the commissioner of labor from New Jersey, Carl Holdeman, complained to then secretary of labor James P. Mitchell that West Indian labor was still used instead of available Puerto Rican labor. The reason for this was that farmers could exploit West Indians more openly, while Puerto Ricans were protected by a contract secured by the Puerto Rican government.

Even after the Wagner-Peyser Act led to the restructuring of the Bureau of Employment and Migration, the Puerto Rican government kept its bureau-
cratic institutions in charge of implementing its migration policy intact. The reason for this, according to Sierra Berdecía, was that even though the Wagner-Peyser Act declared Puerto Rican workers to be part of the American domestic labor force, Puerto Ricans were different from other American workers and required aid and protection when moving to the United States in search for jobs. For him, Puerto Rico’s BES involved a different function from that in the United States: it

involves such work as providing special information to migrant workers from Puerto Rico to the mainland to assist them in facing new situations in an environment which is ethnologically different. It aims to reduce to a minimum those natural problems of adjustment for the individual and for the community to which he goes.36

Sierra Berdecía reaffirmed his government’s policy of playing an important role in the migration process of Puerto Ricans due to the fact that these were considered as foreign to the United States, not only culturally and linguistically but also in citizenship rights.

THE BUREAU OF EMPLOYMENT AND MIGRATION AND THE FARM PLACEMENT PROGRAM

Puerto Rico’s 1947 migration law expanded already established policies of the Puerto Rican government, like oversight over labor contracts and the maintenance of offices in the U.S. mainland. What had changed was the perspective on Puerto Rican migration to the United States and the correspondent bureaucratic structures created to deal with that migration. In his report to the governor that led to the 1947 migration law, Sierra Berdecía argued that there were two separate and distinct migration flows from Puerto Rico to the United States: migration of individuals going to the U.S. mainland on their own, like the one causing the “Puerto Rican problem” in New York City during the summer of 1947, and organized contract migration going mostly to provide cheap labor to U.S. agriculture.37 The two flows had distinct social bases and destinations: the former had largely a urban character (as The Puerto Rican Journey indicated years later) and went mostly to urban areas like New York City, while the latter came from rural agricultural areas and searched for jobs in U.S. farms, mostly in the Northeast. The goal of the new migration law was to regulate migration so that it would be not only a continuous and organized movement of people away from the island but also one that would satisfy the
needs of U.S. employers and cause the least problems for the adaptation of the migrant workers as well as for their U.S. communities.

To fulfill this goal, the law created two separate but interrelated bureaucratic structures within the Department of Labor: the Bureau of Employment and Migration in San Juan and the Migration Office in New York (later to become the Migration Division). The former was in charge of managing the recruitment and selection of workers going mostly to U.S. agricultural jobs, while the latter dealt with the migrants’ needs and adaptation for those already in the United States. In short, BEM organized the movement of contract labor while the Migration Office addressed issues related largely to individual migration. Most scholars studying the government’s role in migration have focused on the Migration Division following Lapp’s influential study, reproducing the mistaken notion that the Migration Division and Senior were crucial in making Puerto Rico’s migration policy. Migration policy was made in San Juan by Sierra Berdecía and a few other policy makers close to the center of power, Muñoz Marín. This was never truer than in the workings of the Farm Placement Program (FPP), managed by BEM in San Juan under the direction of Petroamérica Pagán de Colón and the supervision of the commissioner of labor. This was the agency in charge of recruiting, selecting, and then directing migrant workers from Puerto Rico’s rural areas to farms in the United States. Initially, it regulated the contract labor agencies recruiting farmworkers on the island, but it later expanded its functions to enter into agreements directly with U.S. farmers employing Puerto Ricans.38

BEM’s goals and procedures followed the guidelines of the 1947 migration law.39 Its rationale was to aid the labor surplus population in finding jobs, whether in Puerto Rico or in the United States. Migration to the United States became an important outlet for the unemployed in Puerto Rico, particularly those from rural areas. First by regulating labor contractors and making sure farmworkers left the island with a labor contract approved by the government, and then by taking over the negotiation of contracts directly with U.S. employers, BEM sought to provide a regulated and reliable source of labor for U.S. agriculture. Additionally, the protection of farm labor by Puerto Rico’s government made it possible for Puerto Rican farmworkers to look at migration to “the North” as a worthwhile endeavor, one that was protected by their government.40

The name itself—Bureau of Employment and Migration—pointed to the close relationship that existed in the minds of Puerto Rican policy makers between providing employment for island workers and migration to the United States: after a few years of operation, most of the job placements by BEM were in the United States. As several migration policy makers used to
say, the FPP was the other side of Operation Bootstrap, the PPD’s economic development program. Furthermore, BEM was in full agreement with the broader goal established by Sierra Berdecía when he took over the Department of Labor: to provide “industrial peace” in Puerto Rico by managing the relationship between labor, the state, and capital (be it in Puerto Rico or in the United States).

In his first report to the governor after BEM was created, Sierra Berdecía justified the FPP on the basis of a surplus labor from the sugar cane industry in Puerto Rico (particularly during the tiempo muerto—the dead season—when there was no harvest and no jobs) and the need for agricultural labor in the United States; Puerto Rican farmworkers would be employed in those areas where they were needed instead of foreign workers. In its first year of operation, the commissioner of labor boasted that “for the first time in the history of agricultural labor in the continent, a minimum guaranteed period of employment of 160 hours for every four week period was included in the contract for Puerto Ricans.” Other achievements were the placement of laborers in the Midwest and the Northeast regions of the United States, and the opening of a migration office in Chicago. Migration officials liked to point out the benefits of this program, particularly its economic impact on the island as a consequence of the remittances sent to the island by migrants and the impact on the unemployment rate and related social issues (education, social services, etc.) on the government’s finances.

One of the most important achievements for the BEM and the Department of Labor was the acceptance of a labor contract by both workers and U.S. employers. The required labor contract for migrants going to work in the United States was implemented in September 1947, months before the approval of Puerto Rico’s migration law in December. Puerto Rican migration policy makers liked to boast that the Puerto Rican farmworkers’ contract was the best one protecting migratory labor in the United States. Migratory labor in the United States was laxly regulated throughout the first half of the twentieth century by a diverse set of federal and state laws and policies, usually in favor of farmers to the detriment of laborers. The latter composed a complex and diverse force, including the government-regulated Mexican bracero program, West Indian contract labor, undocumented Mexican workers, and the diverse domestic labor force largely consisting of U.S. peoples of color. Puerto Ricans were particular in their membership as domestic labor in the migratory labor economy: they were the only domestic group openly protected by state (in this case, a U.S. territory) government contract, quite like the labor contracts protecting foreign labor from Mexico and the West Indies. Most of the central aspects of the Puerto Rican labor contract were similar to
the contracts required by the Mexican and West Indian governments allowing their workers to come to the United States in terms of regulating wages and working conditions, transportation costs, and so on. In this sense, Puerto Ricans were “foreign in a domestic sense” to the U.S. agricultural labor system in the same way that the U.S. Supreme Court had declared Puerto Rico to be in relationship to the United States in *Downes v. Bidwell*.

BEM director Pagán de Colón stated in her review of the FPP that both state and federal employment services and agricultural employers were strongly opposed to the contract enforced by the Puerto Rican government, arguing that as U.S. citizens they had no need for a formal contract as required for foreign workers (like the *bracero* program). She argued that U.S. laws did not protect agricultural workers and that, in addition, her department held “that the Puerto Rican worker is in a disadvantage with regards to local workers because of the difference in language, their ignorance of the traditions of work and housing, and for a lack of knowledge on the resources that communities have to benefit its citizens.” While claiming preference for Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens over foreign workers, Department of Labor officials argued that they nevertheless required special attention in the United States because they were treated like foreign workers due to their different culture and language and their lack of knowledge and connection to U.S. culture, habits, language, laws, and social traditions. They contended that island workers were citizens of a different kind that needed the protection of Puerto Rico’s government because there was no state structure in the United States to protect them and guarantee their rights as U.S. citizens. That is, Puerto Rico’s colonial state had to fight the metropolitan state over meanings of citizenship for Puerto Ricans.

According to Monserrat, the demise of FPP in the late 1970s was due to both the election of the New Progressive Party in Puerto Rico, whose pro-statehood ideology refused to sustain any kind of migration program, and to the strong opposition by U.S. farmers to employing Puerto Rican workers as domestic labor with preference over foreign labor. In 1976, apple farmers in the Northeast refused to hire Puerto Rican farmworkers on the basis that the contract required by the Puerto Rican government was too onerous for them and U.S. Department of Labor regulations prevented them from hiring cheaper foreign labor. Federal courts supported the claims of the apple growers and put a de facto end to Puerto Rico’s FPP; Puerto Ricans’ U.S. citizenship no longer provided them with preferential treatment over foreign labor.

In its first year of operation, the BEM had four field offices in Puerto Rico and two main offices in San Juan and New York, with an additional office in Chicago. It enforced a contract between workers and employers guaranteeing
not only minimum hours of work but also wages, transportation costs, living and working conditions, workmen’s compensation, and a prohibition of any kind of discrimination. During FPP’s history, BEM never allowed the legal hiring of Puerto Rican workers in the South due to the region’s widespread racism. Another important part of the contract was that Puerto Rican workers would earn the prevalent wage in the region, that is, no higher but not less than the wages earned by the established workers in any specific area. This stipulation, as reported by Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor, was similar to other “foreign labor agreements.” This policy, along with the ones requiring that Puerto Rican workers would go where there was a certified need for workers and that they would support unions where they existed, was an attempt to prevent conflicts with U.S. organized labor in those regions where island workers migrated to work. As in many other instances, Puerto Ricans were not included in the determination of a domestic labor shortage in American agriculture; like foreign labor, they would be called to fill the labor shortage of domestic workers. Furthermore, Sierra Berdecía concluded in his first-year report that “for the first time, the Bureau was faced with the necessity of itself doing the recruitment which was carried on the year before by private employment agents.” That is, in order to guarantee an organized and selective process of migration, BEM assumed the role played before by private labor contractors, whose lack of selectivity and protection of workers in the United States had caused many problems for the workers and for the government. The Puerto Rican government, then, became a labor contractor—an intermediary between the Puerto Rican worker and the U.S. agricultural employer. (This subject will be discussed further in chapter 7.)

During its first year of operations, the bureau placed 11,820 workers in jobs in Puerto Rico and the United States. While the overwhelming majority of the 6,024 placements in Puerto Rico were in industrial jobs (satisfying the labor needs of Fomento manufacturing plants), most of the 5,796 jobs found in the United States were in agriculture, a pattern that would not change in decades to come. The annual report stated that the net migration from Puerto Rico to the United States that year was 33,053; in other words, most Puerto Ricans going to the United States were individual migrants. The report also made note of the counseling services and warnings given to this group as they moved to the U.S. mainland.

The Farm Placement Program came to be the most complex and important of BEM’s programs in Puerto Rico, which included industrial and agricultural employment on the island, workers’ compensation and arbitration (including the regulation of wages by specific industries), and unemployment benefits, among others. By 1950, the recruitment process was carried out...
in twenty-eight offices working on the registration and orientation of workers. The bureau also carried out a coordinated media and publicity program to advise farmworkers not to migrate on their own, to avoid dishonest contractors and travel agencies, and to refrain from engaging in farm labor in the United States if they were not up to that kind of work.60 According to Sierra Berdecía, the department’s 1951 records showed “abundant proof . . . that workers were recruited from agricultural areas and not from larger metropolitan districts.”61

In 1950, almost two-thirds of BEM’s job placements were for jobs in the United States: by this time, migration was considered the best means for reducing agricultural unemployment on the island. For the fiscal year 1951–52 there were 424,797 visits to local offices in Puerto Rico, with 42,420 new job applications; in addition, some 24,331 people were interviewed for employment in the Migration Division in the United States. The total number of placements made in Puerto Rico that year was 12,263, out of which 11,457 were in nonagricultural jobs, a reflection of the growing impact of Operation Bootstrap on the island. On the other hand, 12,491 agricultural workers from the island went to the United States under the FPP, and 8,108 were placed by the Migration Division on the mainland.62

The FPP continued to grow in the coming years and decades, reaching its peak in the late 1960s when close to twenty thousand farmworkers would go to U.S. farms yearly under the auspices of the program. According to estimates by Monserrat, from 1948 to 1990, some 427,604 Puerto Rican migrant workers were recruited and placed in agricultural jobs in the United States under the FPP.63 This program had an important impact on the development of Puerto Rican communities in the United States, as Pagán de Colón claimed, by procuring “job opportunities in areas outside of New York” and was also helpful to the island by finding “job opportunities for residents of the rural areas in Puerto Rico.”64 The farmworkers moved to the United States by the government’s program were crucial in the making of Puerto Rican communities in places like Chicago, Philadelphia, Hartford, and many other cities around the Northeast.65 The emergence and development of these communities was influenced by the migration of rural workers, overwhelmingly male, mostly unskilled and uneducated, with limited or no urban background, going first to do farmwork and then moving to urban areas in search of better jobs. Recruitment of prospective farmworker migrants in Puerto Rico’s rural areas also had a significant impact on the social and economic development of these regions.66

Many agricultural employers in the United States resented the contract and the intervention of the Puerto Rican government, particularly small farm-
ers who could not afford the costs related to the government contract. In order to avoid the illegal hiring of workers by labor contractors and farmers, the Department of Labor entered directly into labor agreements with U.S. agricultural employers, particularly with farm cooperatives or associations. Where these associations were nonexistent, the Puerto Rican government encouraged their formation to collectively guarantee fulfilling the requirements of the labor contract. Several farm cooperatives and associations were created in those states where Puerto Rican farmworkers became an important source of labor, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York.67

By the early 1950s, a growing number of farmers in the Northeast began to depend on Puerto Rican labor to harvest their crops due to the reduction of domestic and foreign labor available at the time. Pagán de Colón indicates that in 1948, 2,382 Puerto Rican farmworkers were hired by just four U.S. employers; by 1951 some 11,725 Puerto Ricans were providing their services to thirty-six U.S. farmers and by 1954, 14,153 island workers were laboring for ninety-six U.S. farmers.68 But there was another reason for the increased hiring of island farmworkers: the reliability of the Puerto Rican labor force guaranteed by the Puerto Rican government. The contract benefitted both parties, not only the workers; some of the most important contracts were supervised by Governor Muñoz Marín directly and guaranteed a reliable and screened labor force with stipulated labor costs.69 By the early 1950s, federal and local functionaries agreed that the Puerto Rican government's migration program could provide jobs for some one hundred thousand Puerto Rican workers in the United States; they acknowledged that migration would be the best solution to solve the local unemployment problem and provide the needed labor in U.S. agricultural enterprises.70

MIGRATION PLANS TO LATIN AMERICA

After the approval of the December 1947 migration law, the accepted idea was to organize the migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States. Still, even after specific programs were implemented to coordinate and encourage migration to the mainland, island government officials considered the idea of advocating migration and colonization projects in Latin America. Although none of these projects was ever realized, the discussion around them nevertheless proves the government's interest in redirecting migration away from the United States. There are several plausible explanations for this position. Migration to Latin America could be seen as a mechanism to reduce the outflow to the mainland and thus prevent the emergence or recurrence of "Puerto
Rican problem” campaigns in areas where Puerto Ricans settled. This situation hurt the image of the Puerto Rican government in the United States and in Puerto Rico; it also hindered the entrance of new migrants to the mainland. Furthermore, during this time there was still opposition by some sectors in the United States to the continued entrance of Puerto Ricans.71

Latin America was seen by some Puerto Rican decision makers as an outlet where the government could promote the outflow of the island’s excess labor force. Although migration to the United States was the official policy, some inside the government still questioned its merits. There were legitimate concerns with the adaptability of Puerto Ricans to American society in terms of culture, language, climate, and ideas. Some PPD leaders believed that Latin American societies would be more compatible for the adaptation of island migrants, while questioning migration to the United States based on the cultural and linguistic rejection faced by islanders on the U.S. mainland, along with the acute experiences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination. They also decried the status of Puerto Ricans in the United States as “second-class citizens.”72

During the summer and fall of 1947, several proposals to allow the migration of Puerto Rican workers and families to the Dominican Republic and Venezuela were discussed by top government officials, including the governor’s Migration Advisory Committee. There was opposition to these migration projects to Latin America from U.S. government functionaries, based on economic and political considerations. For H. Rex Lee, from the Department of Interior, migration to Latin American countries “seems to us to offer very little hope because of the many diplomatic and political factors involved. However, we agree with you that the whole subject should be explored thoroughly.” Lee captured the prevailing sentiment for U.S. policy makers when he argued that

it seems to us that the most hope lies in sending workers to the continent under a plan which would take them to cities, other than New York City, where there are job opportunities, and where there are reasonable chances for their integration into community life.73

Although consideration of these migration plans to Latin America by island government officials continued well into the mid-1950s, none of the plans ever materialized and migration to the United States remained the government’s policy. One crucial reason for not implementing migration plans to Latin America was the opposition of the U.S. government. The colonial government could not implement these plans on its own. The major reason U.S.
government officials rejected the idea was, of course, because Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens. The possible diplomatic entanglements of having U.S. citizens colonizing lands in postwar Latin America was simply too much trouble. This is one more example of how colonialism and citizenship determined the trend of Puerto Rican migration in just one direction: to the United States. But it also shows how Puerto Rican functionaries assumed the “relative autonomy” of the colonial state in the area of migration and how they kept pushing the limits of the colonial relationship with the United States by discussing emigration plans with Latin American governments.

Brazil was the country that received the sharpest attention from Puerto Rican government officials as a potential site for migration and colonization by island labor. In August 1946, *El Mundo* revealed that Brazilian representatives had expressed interest in receiving workers from Puerto Rico. A year later, economic advisor Donald O’Connor informed government officials of a proposal to develop the San Francisco River Valley in Brazil; he hoped that “some arrangement for admitting Puerto Rican farmers can probably be effected.” In early January 1949, geographer Earl Parker Hanson, responding to a request made by the recently elected governor Muñoz Marín, submitted a proposal for the study of a planned migration program to Brazil, specifically in the San Francisco River Valley and the Amazon area. Hanson asserted that “the fact that U.S. capital and technology are themselves beginning to flow into the expanding economies of Latin America will eventually mean that Puerto Rican emigration will flow in the same direction.” Ventura Barnes, an adviser to the Planning Board, supported Hanson’s proposal to send Puerto Ricans to the San Francisco River Valley, whose future development he characterized as “a kind of TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority].” Barnes proposed that the Puerto Rican Land Authority could buy vast tracts of land that could serve “as outlet to the tremendous population excess that we actually experience.” He also supported the idea of sending migrants to the Amazon Basin. He concluded that the situation required “an educational development to forge in the minds of Puerto Rican generations the idea of migration” to more prosperous places that could sustain them. Planning Board president Rafael Picó called Hanson and Barnes’ support for this proposal “a bit too optimistic,” although he added that “it is worthy to study all the possibilities, no matter how remote the solution is, to our awful population problem.” At this time, Governor Muñoz Marín was very interested in the realization of this study by Hanson. Puerto Rican and Brazilian officials also discussed a possible colonization plan for the State of Pará during the summer of 1949. Sierra Berdecía supported examining the idea but insisted on maintaining the government’s strict guidelines for sending migrants to other places. During this time, the
governor was still pushing for the realization of Hanson’s study; financing it seems to have been the major obstacle.79

Despite the attention given to these proposals by top decision makers, other officials questioned the validity of the Brazilian migration plans. Attached to Hanson’s proposal mentioned earlier are some typed notes that are very critical of this plan. The unknown author noted that the population required by the Brazil project would remove a very productive labor sector from the island and that the operation would be very costly to the island government; the notes further cautioned about migrant adaptation to the new environment and a lower standard of living and salaries than in the United States. The detractor warned that any “discontent that could emerge in the emigrant class could be used and exploited as a political weapon by the opposition” and argued that the current migration program by the Department of Labor “is approaching the problem in a realistic way.”80 The Brazilian colonization plan was also questioned by O’Connor, who argued that the costs of transportation and family settlement were too high and that migration to the United States and population control measures “appear to be more economical, more feasible, more constructive and more desirable.”81

In 1951, Fomento director Teodoro Moscoso began to seriously consider renewed suggestions by Brazilian officials for a Puerto Rican colonization program in their country. He convinced Muñoz Marín to send Fomento’s Rafael Fernández García to Brazil to study the possibilities of such a plan. After meeting with Brazilian government officials, including advisers to President Getulio Vargas, Fernández García found the “ideal” place in an area south of Sao Paulo along the Ribeira River and close to the Bay of Cananeia, where he envisioned a well-developed Puerto Rican colony of three hundred thousand. He drafted a sixteen-point plan stipulating that Brazil would provide some six thousand square kilometers of land while Puerto Rico would finance the transportation costs of migrants and administer the colony. The total cost of the project for Puerto Rico would be $100 million over a ten-year period. Two events prevented the project from further consideration: Muñoz Marín was too occupied in the political debate that led to the creation of the Commonwealth in 1952, and President Vargas was later removed from power in August 1954 by a military coup.82 Another colonization plan to Brazil was presented in 1954 by Brazilian senator Assis Chateaubriand. News accounts reported that the government of Puerto Rico was discussing the details of implementing such a plan with the Brazilian government.83 As with earlier colonization plans in Brazil, Chateaubriand’s plan was not implemented.

Other Latin American countries were also considered by Puerto Rican decision makers as sites for possible migration and colonization by Puerto
Ricans. By late 1947, *El Mundo* revealed that Venezuela’s consul in Puerto Rico announced that a high-level government delegation would visit Puerto Rico in search of an agreement with the island government. Venezuela was particularly interested in sugar cane workers, who could get year-round work on Venezuelan plantations. In February 1948, Venezuela’s consul met with Governor Piñero and Muñoz Marín to discuss a concrete migration plan. The Venezuelan project envisioned the entrance of five million migrants during a twenty-year period. No agreement was reached, nor was any Puerto Rican worker ever sent to Venezuela by the island government.84

Surinam was also among the sites considered by Puerto Rican officials for a colonization project. In March 1947, several members of the island’s House of Representatives submitted a resolution supporting a plan wherein the United States would buy the territory of Dutch Guiana (Suriname) and establish a Puerto Rican colony there. The idea was advanced by the Foreign Policy Association in the United States (which also proposed granting the island its independence). By the summer of 1948, the idea of a colonization and emigration program to Surinam was still under consideration by the Puerto Rican government; it was also an idea supported by the Caribbean Commission.85 In March 1955, a government delegation from Costa Rica visited Puerto Rico to discuss the possible migration of Puerto Rican farmers to the Central American country. After meetings with Puerto Rican government officials, both parties agreed that an island delegation would visit Costa Rica to have further discussions on the project. But increasing opposition in Costa Rica and among Puerto Ricans detained the project.86