

Native Workers: Berries Instead Of Per Diem Pay

(From Anchorage Daily Times)

The Tri-Trades Council is seeking court help for 24 of its Native members the union claims were shortchanged by the Alaska Department of Highways on per diem pay merely because the workers are Natives.

In a suit filed in Superior Court here, the union wants the state to make up for the allegedly \$35 too-low per diem pay for some 20 workers last summer near Nome and four union members who worked for the Department of Highways near Livengood last winter.

"I guess the amount the state failed to pay is somewhere around \$50,000," said Tri-Trades Secretary Treasurer, Chuck Gavin.

The issue has been a bee in the union's hard hat since last summer, according to Gavin. He said the union had to call some safety meetings in Fairbanks to "even get commissioner, Walt Parker, to answer our calls."

The union official said the 20 workers on a project about 50 miles from Nome last summer were paid \$8 per diem payments when the tri-trades contract calls for a per diem of \$43. The Livengood workers allegedly received a \$20 per diem.

"We were told by the Highway Department two reasons the pay was set at that figure," said Gavin. "One was 'the Natives weren't used to getting that much money,' so it would foul up the economy of Nome."

The other argument he says was offered was that since there was berry picking near the construction site along with good fishing, the Natives didn't need any more money.

Gavin did not say who told him the reasons, but he did say Commissioner of Administration Andy Warwick properly had told the Highway Department to negotiate a settlement of the complaint with the union.

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However Gavin said, "Parker has acted as if the whole thing would go away if he ignored it."

"They made no offer other than saying the original per diem payments were sufficient, so we go to court," he added.

Gavin described what he says were substandard construction camp housing the workers were docked for from their per diem of \$43.

"The housing near the Nome site is just shacks and pretty ratty," he said. On that project, Gavin estimated there were 20 men who worked from 2½ to 70 days.

"The Livengood camp was a trailer home," he said. "But it had no running water. The well dried up and there were no real toilet facilities for the four men who occupied it."

"We've said we'd pay a reasonable rent, say \$8 or \$10 for this housing," he said. "But in effect the state was charging the workers \$30 per day for housing because all the per diem pay the workers received in hand was \$8."

"That's really gross discrimination," charged Gavin. He claims the union has been trying to settle the dispute through negotiations with the Highway Department since October.