

● Construction Big in Bethel, No Jobs for Local Residents

The construction industry is booming in Bethel but local people are not getting their share of the benefits, according to sources there.

Although approximately \$45 million worth of construction projects are underway in the area, some local residents are frustrated because many of the jobs associated with these projects are going to outsiders. In a recent open letter to the press, residents stated:

"Because there is no control and no strict definition of local hire in our area, more construction employees with guaranteed jobs are arriving from urban centers in Alaska and outside of Alaska to Bethel.

At the root of the problem is the old question of whether rural people are "qualified" for work required by some projects

—a stumbling block to local or resident hire throughout the years of oil pipeline construction. This explanation of why more Bethel people have not been hired this summer does not satisfy everyone. The open letter continues:

"We believe it may be true, to some degree, that those jobs which are considered technical jobs require experienced skilled workers. However, the term is highly exaggerated. Some of those positions are not as technical as they are said to be, and easily be filled by a local Bethel Area resident. In addition, the area has some experienced skilled workers among whom are former Alyeska pipeliners."

The Bethel projects include homes, schools, sewers, an airport runway and a new hospital. Although several unions are

represented by the skills needed for these projects, the record of unions finding jobs for their Native members has not been good in many cases. With unemployment in the Bethel region especially high, residents are stung by the apparent lethargy of some unions as well as contractors. A point brought by the

open letter:

"We feel that the contractor and union offices located in the urban centers of Alaska and elsewhere have been unresponsive to the needs of our area as shown by the hiring of their employees almost exclusively from the urban areas in Alaska and areas outside of the State."

"Presently, a Bethel resident is in the process of filing charges against one of the unions for discriminatory hiring procedures based on local hire in this region."

According to an article published in the Tundra Drums (Bethel), one Bethel shop

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steward was told by his union superiors to contact contractors about jobs. Out of four firms contacted, only one has responded so far.

A "Petition for the Better Definition and Control for Implementation of the Local Hire Laws in the Bethel-AVCP Region," is being prepared for Governor Jay Hammond, Alaska's Congressional delegation, and the area's state legislators. According to Nastasia Markham, one of the petition's sponsors several hundred people have signed the petition. In part, the petition charges:

"For any job which arises in the region, those residents of the region who qualify should have first chance of those jobs. This is the spirit of the local hire laws and agreements. However, this spirit of the local hire laws and agreements. However, this spirit is mocked by the letter of the agreements which allow for changing definitions of skilled and unskilled labor so as to exclude local residents from hire. The spirit of the law is further abused by lack of any sort of training, either on or off the job."

The petition concludes:

"We therefore, go on record that the best way to achieve this goal (local hire) is by local control of the union and contractor hiring practices. A step toward reaching this goal is removal of the hiring halls to the local level, to Bethel in this case."