

Guest Editorial—

By JOHN SACKETT

Each of us as Alaskan Natives should be extremely concerned about the effect that the proposed Trans-Alaska Pipeline will have on our lives. Too often we will run with the general trend of the day and support something that perhaps really doesn't benefit us just because it is the "thing" to do and it is popular.

I believe that it is our right to question thinking that is prevalent today, that being, how is the pipeline going to benefit our people in terms of employment and life-style.

The history of the state for Alaskan Native employment has not been good to us. Whatever the reasons that are given, be they ranging from the stereotype of the lazy Indian who doesn't want to work, to the situation of many of our people being away from work centers, the fact does remain that 80% of our people are unemployed and it certainly appears as if this is going to continue unless everyone makes a concerted effort to change this situation.

A hundred years ago all of our people were unemployed and their only livelihood was living off the land. In all this time — 100 years total — only 20% of our people are working and the rest are still trying to live off the land, a method of living that is becoming more and more difficult every passing day. There will come a time soon when even Native people will not be able to live off the land and when that time does arrive, what will we do then?

Without question, the programs and attempts for Native employment have not been successful to date. People throughout the State have stated that they are making continuous attempts to hire Alaskan Natives. They state that they have program galore, and yet, we still have the highest unemployment rate in the nation. It is no wonder that we would question exactly how much of an attempt these people are making for Native employment.

It is a fact that we have our share of persons who do not want to work at all. It is also a fact that there are many people who do not want to leave the villages and move into the urban centers. It does remain a fact, however, that the majority of our people do want to work, especially on a seasonal basis, but they are not yet — after 100 years — assimilated into the work force of Alaska. The two basic reasons are that training programs have not been geared for Alaskan Native employment and the present system of labor in Alaska legally discriminates against Alaskan Natives.

These are terrible accusations to make, but the facts are what they are — we are still unemployed for these specific reasons. The administrators of training programs have never studied the Native way of life. For example, every training program has always been geared to working in cities when Native people do not want to work there. They have always been geared to permanent year-around employment rather than seasonal which fits much more readily into the Native way of life. These are only a couple of examples of many that must be taken into consideration when training Native people, but they haven't ever been recognized yet by the administrators.

Nearly all employment in Alaska is performed through unions of one sort or another. Unions in general have been extremely beneficial to their members and have been successful in obtaining employment for them. But Alaskan Natives are excluded because the majority of us do not know (1) how to join, and (2) the labor unions have given only lip service and never made any aggressive attempt to bring in Native people. Until these two areas are recognized and solved, Native people will never be employed.

The public will cry that we are attempting to hold up the progress of the state by protesting the pipeline until these areas of concern are resolved, but look at the facts

and you will find that really the Native receives very little or nothing. True, some of us will be hired, but not the majority, and there will be training programs but they too will be unsuccessful in meeting our needs. Unfortunately, the history of employment in Alaska has shown that the Native never participates and outsiders will flow into Alaska like the times of southeastern pulp-mills, gold rushes, and the Kenai oil exploration. In the end, we may well have wished we had never heard of the pipeline because by that time, our present subsistence life will also be gone.