

'Local hire' issue raises many questions

by Paul Swetzof

for the Tundra Times

Many people representing state government, corporations, unions, state employee associations and others seem to be on a roll regarding local hire.

And yet, questions need to be asked regarding local hire. The first is: what is it? If you live in a village somewhere, do you really care if the stranger coming to your village to take a job you may be qualified for, or can learn, is from Anchorage, Juneau or Texas?

The closest thing to real local hire in Alaska seems to be the Red Dog Mine. The big deal here is that NANA and Cominco have agreed that 50 percent of the people hired to work at the mine be residents of the NANA region.

This means, of course, that 50 percent don't have to be residents of the region, and this means that the Northwest Arctic Borough could conceivably gain enough new voters to kill Inupiaq control of the NANA region.

Another likely result is that many of the "residents" of the region may do what so many others have done, which is move into the region — or get a Post Office box — in order to establish residency to get in on the good economic times.

So does local hire mean any residents of the area, regardless of the time they have spent in the area, should get the job?

This is precisely what the oil companies have done as they clamor to ~~prove~~ ~~their~~ ~~workers~~ are "Alaskans."

Who are our friends on this issue? The oil companies refer to Alaska hire, not local hire. As we learned during the pipeline construction period, villagers living immediately next to the pipeline couldn't get jobs making beds.

State workers' unions and associations, such as the Alaska Public Employees Association brag about the fact that their members are Alaskans, not locals.

Those of us who have worked for state government or have been here for more than a month know the numbers of people who have come to Alaska and gotten state jobs because they get paid more here than at similar jobs in their home state.

We have watched as APEA has fought the concept that qualified people should get points on the state register for living in the local area, for speaking the language of the local area and for having worked in cross-cultural situations.

A good example of this practice are fish technicians who work for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game counting fish. These people are hired off the register, supposedly for their knowledge.

Never mind the fact that they can't identify a dog salmon from a king under water. They just count away. Meanwhile, some kid from the local village who can tell what type of fish is heading upstream with one eye closed and from 100 feet can't get the job.

And do we all remember the big stink the state employees' union made when some public assistance jobs were contracted out to local people through Manilaq?

The Legislature talks local hire as though it's a religion, but legislators who received heavy campaign contributions from the oil companies always manage to exclude the oil companies and hide behind the guise of the Constitution. And those that really do fight for local hire really mean Alaska hire.

To his credit, Gov. Steve Cowper has talked about local hire on occasion, in the true sense of the word.

The trouble is, it's still just talk.

I don't think we have any great allies in this battle other than a few of our local legislators, such as Adelheid Hermann, Fred Zharoff, Willie Hensley, Kay Wallis, John Binkley and a few others.

What's the solution? Be creative and come up with ones on your own.

I offer the following:

- Strengthen Native village governments in order to be able to contract out services to the village council, the ultimate local benefit.

- Insist on local hire clauses on all contracts which your village corporation, regional corporation and local government let out.

- Recall local leaders who don't

actively pursue local hire.

- Protest vigorously when local hire is not pursued.

- Even though it runs against our way of thinking, refuse to provide support services to outside workers or hospitality of any kind. (I know this is tough.)

- Learn to do the jobs which may be available in your area and which you have an interest in.

The only qualifier I would offer is that it be kept in mind that sometimes the only person qualified to do some jobs may be an outsider. That person should be treated as a guest, unless he abuses his welcome.

With perseverance, respect and hard work maybe we can overcome this problem.