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## 6 workers for every open job, feds say

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**By Dean Calbreath**

With the national unemployment rate nearing a post-Depression high, there are more than six times as many workers looking for jobs as there are job openings, according to government data released yesterday.

The good news is that the number of job openings has improved slightly since reaching a recent low point this summer and the number of layoffs is slowing.

Economists say the ratio of job-seekers to vacancies is further evidence that unemployment will remain high even after the economy stabilizes.

“Locally, the unemployment rate has already exceeded most of the previous estimates for the end of 2009,” said Kelly Cunningham, economist with National University’s Institute for Policy Research. “The latest numbers suggest that the numbers will continue rising toward the second half of 2010 and it could be 2011 before we go below 10 percent.”

During the last three major recessions — in 1982, 1991 and 2001 — it took more than a year for the unemployment rate to peak after the downturns officially ended.

Nationwide, there was an average of 6.1 unemployed workers for every job opening in October, according to a Labor Department report. That is only a slight improvement from 6.2 workers in September, which was the highest number since the department began tracking job openings nine years ago.

The number of layoffs last month showed a slight improvement, slipping from 2.3 million in August to 2.1 million in September. During the same time, the number of job openings increased slightly from 2.4 million to 2.5 million.

Those figures are still high by historical standards. When the recession began in December 2007, there were 1.7 unemployed workers per opening.

San Diego County continues to fare worse than the national average, according to a report released this week by Juju.com, an online job search engine. The report, which echoes the findings of other surveys, estimates there are 7.7 job-seekers in San Diego for every job opening.

That survey ranks the county as 37th out of the top 50 markets in the country. The worst is Detroit, where there are 21.6 workers per opening. In stimulus-enriched Washington, D.C., there are two job-seekers per opening.

Phil Blair, who oversees the San Diego and Imperial County operations of the Manpower

temporary-employment agency, said those figures jibe with what he sees.

“Before the recession, there might have been two or three people applying for the same job in San Diego, but that’s not the case anymore,” Blair said.

On the other hand, Blair said that over the past four to six weeks, he has been seeing an increase in demand for temporary workers, which he believes could be a sign that employment is picking up.

“Companies that we haven’t heard from over the past year or so are now coming back to us,” he said. “They’re not asking for a whole lot of people, maybe one, two, three or four. But I think they’re finding that they’ve wrung all of the productivity that they can out of their current staff, using furloughs and overtime, and now hiring’s beginning to percolate again.”

Local job recruiters say that the supply of workers varies widely depending on the position that is posted. They say that they see continuing demand for highly qualified engineers, health care workers, mid-level managers, private educators and specialized sales workers.

“Right now, there’s not a ton of unemployed engineers, so if you’re a good engineer, you’re in a pretty good place,” said Rich Vandermay, president of Management Recruiters in Anaheim, an employment firm that covers San Diego and Orange counties.

But Blair said that lower-level jobs — “the type that could be filled by a high-school dropout, or that will be replaced by computers in two or three years” — continue to languish.

Small businesses are still reluctant to hire, the National Federation of Independent Business said in a monthly survey released yesterday. Sixteen percent of the respondents plan to cut jobs over the next three months, while 9 percent plan to hire.

“Overall, the small business job machine is still in reverse,” said William Dunkelberg, the federation’s chief economist.

Having so many workers vying for so few jobs could have a lasting effect on the labor market, said Murtaza Baxamusa, economist with San Diego’s Center for Policy Initiatives, a liberal think tank.

“I know of folks who are really scrambling and will take any kind of job, no matter what it pays,” Baxamusa said. “That really depresses the market in terms of salaries, raises, benefits and the hours that people are required to work. In every recession, those kind of things take a significant hit, which means that the sooner we get out of this the better it will be, not only for the 10 percent of people who are unemployed but the 90 percent of people who have jobs.”