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WASHINGTON - The number of claims for unemployment benefits filed by newly laid-off workers posted the largest increase in five months in late December, the government said yesterday. But analysts dismissed the development as a seasonal quirk.

Indeed, the more stable four-week moving average of claims continued to decline.

The analysts noted that the 52,000 jump during the week ended Jan. 2 merely returned claims to recent levels after a 40,000 decline the previous week that they also attributed to seasonal factors.

"They are back to normal," said Michael K. Evans, head of a Washington economic forecasting service, who contended the government often has trouble with seasonal adjustments at the end of the year.

"The unemployment claims bounced up, but we knew they would because of the holidays," concurred economist Robert G. Dederick of the Northern Trust Co. in Chicago.

The Labor Department said applications for unemployment insurance totaled 343,000 during the latest reporting period, up from 291,000 during the week ended Dec. 26.

It was the largest increase since the number of new claims grew by 71,000 last Aug. 8. The level during the week ended Dec. 26 had been the lowest since April 1989.

More important, the new report marked the 15th straight week that claims remained below 400,000, which many analysts believe is the threshold between an improving or deteriorating employment situation.

In addition to problems with seasonal adjustment, some analysts like Dederick suggested many newly laid-off workers were too busy with holiday chores to file jobless claims during Christmas week and that the latest report reflected a return to recent trends.

HARD TO MEASURE

"It's best to average them because of the difficulty of getting accurate measurements during the holiday season," agreed Campbell Harvey, associate professor of finance at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

Indeed, most analysts prefer to track a four-week moving average of claims because that smooths out the volatility of the weekly reports.

The average dropped to 331,250 during the period ended Jan. 2 from 332,500 a week earlier. It was the lowest level since the average was 328,750 during the period ended Sept. 30, 1989, and the 13th straight week that it remained under 400,000.

Harvey said the recent trend of claims in the low 300,000 range "is what I expect will be maintained during the first quarter" of 1993.

The number of initial claims did not include the 28,934 claimants using a special emergency unemployment program during the week ended Jan. 2, up from 28,079 the previous week.

The emergency program numbers, unlike the regular claims figures, are not seasonally adjusted.

35 UP, 18 DOWN

The report showed that 35 states and territories recorded increases in claims, and 18 registered declines.

States reporting the largest increases were Michigan, 15,901; Tennessee, 10,757; Pennsylvania, 10,407; South Carolina, 10,253; and Georgia, 6,451.

States registering the largest decreases were Louisiana, 1,074; Washington, 932; Illinois, 849; Texas, 817; and Oregon, 520.

The national figures are adjusted for seasonal variations, but the individual state figures are not.

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