

Jobless rate soars

Edmonton's EI claims 185% higher than last year

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The number of Edmontonians on employment insurance nearly tripled from last year, according to new figures released yesterday by Statistics Canada.

In March 2009, 14,650 locals were receiving EI compared with 5,130 in March 2008. That's a 185% jump and the second largest increase of major Canadian cities behind only Calgary, which saw a 187% jump from a year ago.

Calgary had 15,410 residents receiving regular employment benefits this March, compared to 5,370 one year ago.

In Alberta, the number of regular beneficiaries rose by 10,240 to 42,160 in March, an increase of 32.1% and the fastest monthly increase since Statistics Canada started recording provincial data. EI claims in Alberta are now 162.5% higher than one year ago.

In fact, the number of Albertans receiving benefits has risen at an increasing pace

every month since last October, pushing the total increase over the past five months to 131.1%.

Nationally, the number of beneficiaries rose 10.6% to 681,410 in March, with the largest increases among men and people younger than 25 years of age.

Elsbeth Mehrer, manager of workforce development for Calgary Economic Development, called the increase "very sad," noting, however, that there's still a "stark" difference between the number of people eligible to receive EI and those receiving it.

"The fact that we have seen three times as many people on EI as we did a year ago is certainly indicative of a softening labour market," she said. "The reality, though, is that these numbers don't reflect the total number of people unemployed."

In March, 123,000 people were without a job in Alberta. That number rose to 126,600 in April, pushing the province's unemployment rate to 6% last month.

The worsening trend in

Alberta's labour market means fewer dollars will be spent in the province's economy.

Mehrer said it's "fair to say" retail sales, which had dropped by 1.8% in March in Alberta, are likely to continue dropping.

Nonetheless, Alberta's labour market remains healthier than many other regions in the country, Mehrer said, noting that "within a couple of years we'll be back in a situation where employers will be fighting for talent."

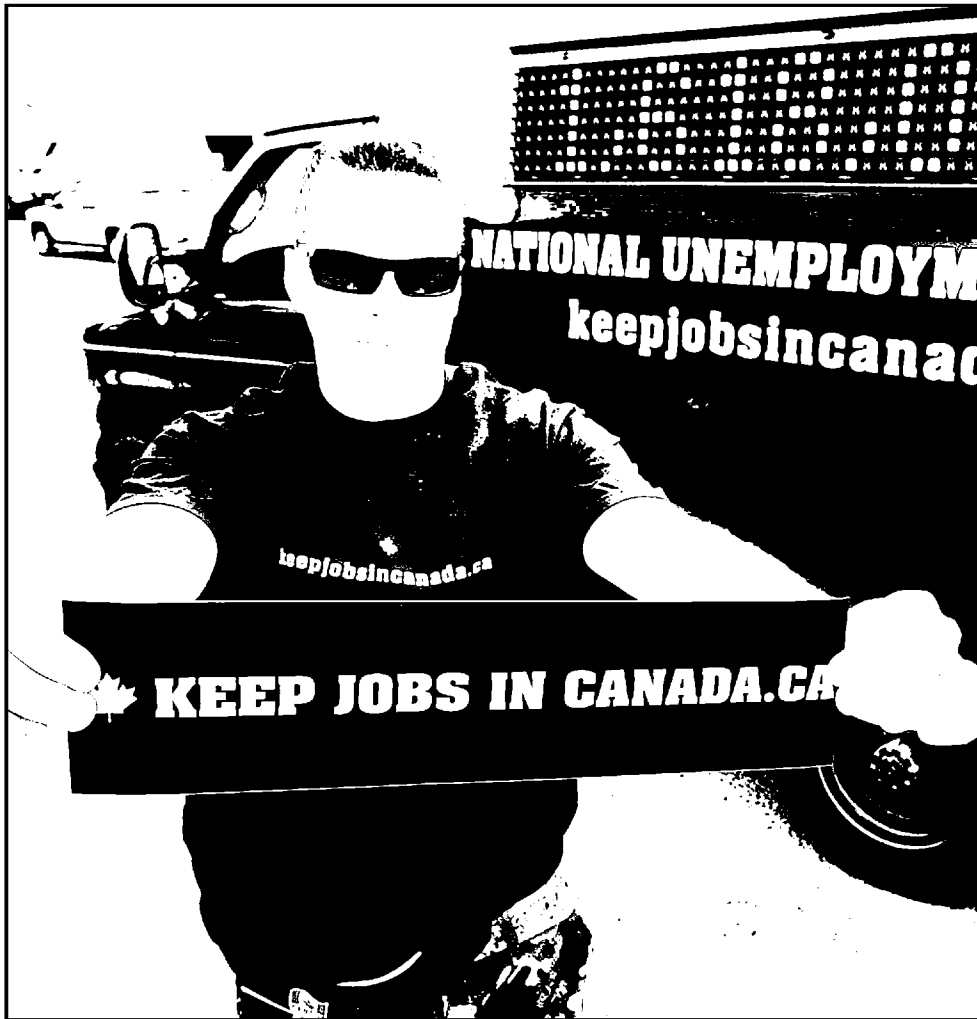
TD Securities economist Millan Mulraine said the "report offers a very dire prognosis on the state of the Canadian labour market."

He said the rise in the number of people remaining on EI in March shows "displaced workers are finding it increasingly difficult to get new jobs, which is consistent with the recent employment reports."

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PERRY MAH/SUN MEDIA

Thomas Stringham, creative director for The National Unemployment Clock, poses yesterday in front of a truck displaying the number of unemployed Canadians. The truck stopped at West Edmonton Mall as part of a nationwide campaign sponsored by the Telecommunication Workers Union to raise awareness of the offshoring of Canadian jobs.