By The Associated Press

Officials say many have left, given up

Louisiana's unemployment rate dropped to 14.3 percent in February but only because the labor force has decreased as people have left the state or given up looking for work, officials said Wednesday.

The state, apparently still leading the nation in the jobless area, had a 14.9 percent rate in January -- the highest since the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, the national jobless rate for February was 7.2 percent, down from 7.3 percent in January, said Allen Johnson of the Louisiana Department of Labor.

In February, slightly more than 1.6 million people were at work while at least 277,300 were jobless, he said.

Oil and gas extraction employment, a key indicator, was down 500 jobs from January but has dropped 17,500 from February 1988, when the unemployment rate was just more than 12 percent, Johnson said.

Construction lost 1,800 jobs from January but is down 10,600 from a year ago.

Manufacturing lost 1,600 jobs from January and is down 4,400 from February 1986.

"The basic reason for the drop in unemployment is that the labor force declined from 1,943,300 in January to 1,940,700 in February," Johnson said.

"People have exhausted their unemployment benefits, have left the state or have been discouraged and given up looking," he said.

He said the agency is predicting some increase in employment next month in the construction, trade and services segments.

"Manufacturing employment may increase in the next month or two," he added.