

## NUMBERS GAME

Official unemployment figures are published each month by the Central Statistics Office. At the last count (26 February 1988) there were 250,575 persons on the live register which is an unemployment rate of 19.2%. The unemployment figures are one indicator of the performance of the Government and so their interpretation is a politically sensitive, and contested, issue.

### *'Selective reporting'*

Official comment on the figures almost always indulges in "selective reporting" i.e. tries to find a way of presenting the figures that reflects well on the Government. The angle that has been taken over the last three months has been to highlight the fact that the live register total in each of these months has been less than the total for the corresponding month one year previously. So for example when the latest figures were released a Government statement pointed out that unemployment was 1,900 lower in February 1988 than in February '87, and said "this trend is encouraging". While the figures used in the official statement are true they are not the whole story. Though total unemployment fell in February (it always does at this time of year because of seasonal factors) it did not fall as much as was expected. So in fact the underlying level of unemployment recorded by the seasonally adjusted live register figures worsened, i.e. increased by 1,100 during February.

### *What exactly do changes in the live register figures show?*

Changes in the live register figures for unemployment are not necessarily linked to changes in the level of employment. So it is possible to reduce registered unemployment other than by increasing employment. A number of factors may act to reduce the official unemployment totals. These include:

\* emigration - currently running at around 30,000 per year - certainly holds down the unemployment level and could bring about actual reductions in the registered totals.

\* any increase in the number of places on State schemes or in the take up of existing places by people on the live register (which is an effect of the Jobsearch programme) means fewer people on the live register.

\* changing the rules governing eligibility to sign on, for example the plan to re-classify older people on the live register as 'pre-retired'.

While the Government has abdicated any direct responsibility for job creation it seems to have increased its efforts to 'massage' the unemployment figures in other ways. For example they claim to have removed some 15,000 people from the live register through the Jobsearch programme. But something is wrong here. The obvious problem with this claim is that there is no sign of any significant decline in the live register total as a result. Either the claim that Jobsearch has removed significant numbers from the register is false or unemployment grew significantly and offset the gains from Jobsearch. Either way the claim backfires on the Government!