

**The Federal President's History Competition Results of the 19th
Competition 2004/2005 in Germany**
“Hard work brings its own reward ? Labour in History”

Report

Autumn 2004 in Germany: The number of unemployed has risen to 4.5 million with a rising tendency. Economic growth has fallen to 1.5 per cent with a decreasing tendency. It is against this backdrop that the Federal President's History Competition was announced under the motto “Hard work bring its own reward? Labour in history”, in reference to one of the fundamental pillars of Federal German society: everyone's welfare is significantly dependent on work. Federal President Horst Kohler and the Körber Foundation invited young people to investigate the historical roots of a working society: What importance did work have in people's lives in the past? How did they act in times of crisis? What have people gained from the changes in the working world, and what have they lost?

Children and young people under 21 were set the challenge of seeking for clues in their home towns or regions. Almost 6,000 participants began the search for historical traces of working life in their own surroundings. By the end of February, 1,380 contributions, of 50 page on average, had been submitted.

Most frequently, access to the topic was found by means of a family link. An important section was comprised of individual working biographies and narratives of small and medium-sized firms. Almost 20 per cent of the participants researched in this area, of which a large share documents the work of parents and grandparents, uncle and aunts, and their stories of independent self-employment and establishment of firms.

Research was undertaken in almost all areas and fields of business. There were significant contributions dealing with agriculture and forestry in rural areas where the change of structure in the economy is felt especially strongly. Skills that no longer exist also fascinated many of the young people: whether it was cooper, wire-drawer or peat-cutter. The opportunity to investigate an unknown working world, especially for the younger ones, offered the chance to realise that today's professions may not exist forever, and that skills once learned could become obsolete over time.

The majority of the participants chose their topics from wage-paying occupations, only about a dozen of the contributions took a closer look at unpaid housework by women. "Women in the labour world" as a subject interested a relatively large number of investigators, not all of whom were girls. About 90 contributions focused on the conditions under which women work as compared with men. That is remarkable as the question of gender in previous competitions had received little consideration.

How can redundancies and closure of companies be prevented? Who needs to act? Who should feel responsible? In the end, according to the message in many papers, everyone is called upon to play their part. The state to create the political framework; the employers who must understand their responsibility for maintaining and creating jobs and for the qualification of employees; the workers themselves, blue and white collar, who, in the course of their career must repeatedly adapt to the challenges of changing needs; and also the consumers whose purchasing decisions can influence business locations and labour requirements in Germany.

The young people's message is quite clear. Everyone must be involved.