

This past fall, as part of a union contract dispute, teachers in Verona, New Jersey conducted a job action that involved refusing to participate in any activities not specifically required under the collective bargaining agreement with the local school board. The previous agreement between the Verona Educational Association, the union representing the teachers, and the Verona School Board expired in June of 1995, and talks between the Association and the Board reached an impasse. The union had sought a 9.3 % pay increase to put the Verona teachers on a par with teachers in similar suburban towns in New Jersey. The Board had offered only 3.63 %. As part of the job action the Verona teachers declined to write any letters of recommendation for college bound seniors. The decision of the teachers not to write letters of recommendation caused outcries of protest in Verona, an affluent suburban community. In mid October the teachers relented, but announced that with the exception of letter writing the job action remained in effect, which included not taking part in open house nights for parents, and cutting out after hours tutoring.

Was the job action, which included not writing letters of recommendation for college bound students, morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The Verona Educational Association's decision to conduct a job action, as part of its dispute with the School board, was morally justifiable, but the tactic of declining to write letters of recommendation for seniors applying to college was not. Economic struggle between a labor organization and an employer, in both the public and private sectors, can be intense and harsh, in some ways resembling conditions of war. Just as in war, "non-combatants" may be affected by a union/employer conflict. Even in war, however, there are ethical standards that limit what counts as acceptable conduct. One such standard is that the tactics employed must be proportional to their objective. In this case the Verona Educational Association's tactic seems disproportional in light of the irreparable harm that would result from it for senior students applying to college, who critically need letters of recommendation.

Case from the February 3, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1995.