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Student strike or activism lite?

by Paul Manna, Guest Columnist
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Several campus groups and students are planning to participate in a one-day student strike Wednesday. This event, known as "Books not Bombs!" and organized by the National Youth and Student Peace Coalition (NYSPC), is designed to protest what these groups and individuals argue are the indefensible priorities of the Bush Administration regarding potential war with Iraq and American education.

Aiming to support the strikers, the UW-Madison Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA) recently passed the following resolution: "Be it finally resolved that TAA members will refrain from penalizing students who participate in actions regarding the war, including students who are absent as part of an organized demonstration."

Despite the TAA's apparent support for the strikers, if students are serious about conveying their anti-war pro-education message, then they should not ask their TAs or professors for opportunities to make up work that they may miss while participating in the strike.

That includes exams, quizzes, class participation and any other graded assignments. And TAs who support the strike should hold their students accountable for any class work on that day. A student who misses class to participate in the strike should fail that day's assignment, whatever it may be.

I can hear the cries in TA offices already. "What? You mean I don't get to re-take the midterm? You're going to give me a zero on the quiz? I fail my class presentation that is due that day? But that's not fair!"

If would-be student protestors are serious about conveying their message, then rather than complaining, they will wear these failing grades like badges of honor.

One reason why strikes and other forms of political protest are frequently effective is that observers recognize that participants have voluntarily chosen to take actions that may carry adverse individual consequences. Thus, students who claim to be passionate about the strike's cause but who are not willing to make a personal sacrifice in the form of a lowered class grade undermine the

very message that the strike is designed to convey.

During the civil-rights protests of the 1960s, for example, participants from the storied sit-in movement knew that they would likely be arrested and jailed for attempting to integrate "white only" lunch counters. Nevertheless, they chose this powerful form of protest to call attention to the evils of segregation and racism.

The link between this example and the March 5 event should be obvious. Students who want to participate in the strike should do so and gladly accept the consequences. Otherwise, it is hard to take seriously a student who walks out of class but still thinks she or he should be allowed to make up class work. "Books not Bombs! ... Peace in Iraq! ... As long as my grade doesn't suffer!" might be the rallying cry of these so-called peace activists.

A second reason why strikers should not be allowed to make up missed work is that providing this option to students who miss class on the day of the strike creates a tempting incentive for all students, whether they support the strike or not, to cut class.

If it is impossible to discern which class-cutters are supporting the strike's message and which are simply looking for a reason to take a long lunch, then the potential power of the protest will be diluted. And casual observers will be forced to draw cynical conclusions about "student activists" who stand up, march out of class, and head to State Street to grab a meal, buy a new CD, or down a cup of coffee.

Overall, then, let me say this to students and TAA members alike.

To the potential student protestors who believe in the strike's cause, I say adopt the mantra "I took a zero for peace!" Save that empty blue book dated March 5, 2003 with your name and the red "F" emblazoned across the front, and show it to your grandchildren many years from now when you recall stories about how you did your part to stop the war.

And to TAA members who may be asked to accommodate a striker by altering an exam time or date, resist the temptation. Rather, make your rallying cry "I gave a zero for peace!" Rarely do TAs enjoy this sort of teachable moment. Don't blow it by taking the easy way out.

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