

## LESSONS FROM AMERICA

Adrian Prandle on a series of documents published by the Young Fabians following the successful Obama campaigning trip last autumn.



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Over a year in the planning, in late October 2008 80 members of the Young Fabians and the Labour Staff Network ventured over the Atlantic to take part in the final days of one of the most exciting political campaigns in recent history.

The delegation to Barack Obama's campaign in the swing state of Ohio included experienced Labour volunteers, political professionals, and some campaigning for the first time. Each brought a different perspective to the unique opportunity they had. Central to the group's positivity towards the campaign was the focus placed on volunteers – recruiting, retaining, training and developing them, so that individual talents were recognised and everyone could make an important contribution.

We present three papers which chronicle the experience of Young Fabian members and others who took part in Obama's campaign and offer ideas for Labour and union campaigns in the UK.

From Ohio to Oxford East presents the collective thoughts of the delegation and subsequent workshops and roundtables to offer practical suggestions for your campaigns.

Part Two: The Essay Collection is an anthology of individual articles written by grassroots participants from the UK.

Lessons from the US union campaign for Obama brings together the methods of union campaigning in the US and presents a case for the Labour Party and trade unions to reassess the ways they work together in UK elections.

The publications can be downloaded



from  
[bit.ly/yfamerica](http://bit.ly/yfamerica).

For more information about any of these publications, please email Adrian Prandle, International Officer on the Young Fabian Executive

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## HERE STARTETH THE FIRST LESSON

Below we reproduce excerpts from the Lessons from America suite of publications

Dan Whittle, Nirmalee Wanduragala, Shruti Dudhia

### LESSONS FROM THE UNIONS

**U**nions can win the next election for Labour – but are both parties willing to make the necessary changes?

60% of union members in America said they voted for Obama when polled in 2008. In the last general election in the UK, only 46% said they voted Labour. Union density in the US is only around 12%, whereas in the UK it is more than double that, around 28%.

With a year to go before Gordon Brown must call a general election, these figures alone make a very strong case that of all the lessons the Obama campaign can teach the Labour Party, the most important might be to strengthen their work with the unions.

And it's clearly not just the personal effect of Barack Obama. The Democrats are consistently receiving 15% more support from unions in general elections than the Labour Party. In 2004 61% voted for Kerry. In 2001 Labour won only approximately 2% more of the union vote than they did in 2005.

In the UK, where 28% of the working population are union members, that extra 15% could easily make the difference at a general election – it equates to between half a million and a million votes. There is no doubt lessons can be learnt in the UK, but they cannot be seamlessly replicated in a different political, legal and technological environment and one in which there is less money to spend. Some will work better, others won't work at all.

Unions in the US can mobilise the vote. 10 million doors knocked, 27 million worksite leaflets distributed, 70 million phone calls and 57 million union direct mail letters. Union members contacted other members in an independent campaign about issues, that was built on years of political education.

In the US, unions realised long ago

that donations to political parties did not deliver the influence they needed, because business could outspend them. The currency common to American and UK unions, and one that all political parties understand is that of an activist base. Membership of all political parties in the UK is less than one quarter of what it was in 1964[2]. With UK unions being the biggest voluntary organisations in the country and UK political parties shedding members, the organisational contribution unions can make becomes more significant.

UK unions which are not affiliated to the Labour Party have tended to leave campaigning at election time to the Labour affiliates. One of the reasons for this is that many members are uncomfortable with dues being spent on Party politics. However, union members do expect their union to campaign and deliver on workplace issues. It is on this basis that non-affiliated unions can justify campaigning on the issues at an election time, when they are most likely to affect the agenda of the next government.

Delivering a pro-union government is just the first step in the process though. Election day was “just the beginning”. The AFL-CIO now have a much increased activist base who are lobbying senators of both parties to pass pro-worker legislation.

In terms of growth overall, union membership grew from 12.1% to 12.4% in 2008 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

So what do unions, and the Labour Party in the UK have to learn from the Democrats and US unions?

Firstly, every union needs to get involved in the campaign on issues. For Australia 2007 it was to chuck out WorkChoices, for the AFL/CIO and Obama, it was the Employee Free Choice Act and the bail out. Trade unions in the UK have to find their core

issue(s) and work together to make them THE issues.

Over here we need to have a version of the ‘Working America’ website, which recruited hundreds of thousands of non-unionised workers to join the union political campaign.

Labour affiliated unions need to facilitate member to member contact using simple messages, phone banks, door to door canvassing and workplace communication. Union members trust each other's advice – not advice from a Labour Party leaflet.

The unions need to run an independent campaign concentrating on the local candidate's pro-worker credentials. We saw this work in the Ken Livingstone campaign where some union members were campaigning for HIM, rather than Labour. The branding of their campaign was different to the Labour Party (purple!), and Ken's record on union issues was accessible.

It might be an advantage for a campaign to look outwardly young, but unions need to activate their retired membership to run the programmes, like US teaching unions did for Obama. Retired members have the time and experience to get things done.

The Labour Party can help all of this, and coordinate the efforts on the ground, by improving the status and training of the trade union liaison officers of local Constituency Labour Parties.

On technology, phone banks need to use the ‘Predictive Dialler’ software that weeds out answerphones and lines that won't accept incoming calls.

The argument from unions might be that the recession means their resources are needed elsewhere.

But in the 1930s the world faced the Great Depression which in the US brought the labour movement, the Democratic majority in Congress and the President into a tight alliance. The CIO leader John L. Lewis campaigned

hard for Roosevelt's re-election in 1936, following his injection of public funds into the economy.

As in 1936, there is an important opportunity for unions to help their members through influencing the issues in the next election, and its result.

**Dan Whittle**  
**Trade Union Officer,**  
**Young Fabian Executive**

## PRACTICAL LESSONS

The US presidential election 2008 was always set to be an important and interesting event for those of us interested in progressive politics in the UK – and indeed across the world. With the prospect of not only a Democrat in the White House but a new, vibrant, and progressive leader in the making with a fresh approach to campaigning, many Labour party members and trade unionists took time out to volunteer on the campaign either as one of the 80 who went out as part of the Labour Staff Network and Young Fabians visit to Ohio, with the trade unions or independently.

For many of us this was not just about being part of a historic campaign, but also about learning from our Democratic colleagues. While there were many parts of the Obama campaign which are specific to the time, the place and the candidate, there were clearly things we could bring back to our campaigning in the UK for the Labour party.

Following our return from the US we got together to discuss our various experiences and to put together this document which we hope will provide food for thought and also an interesting insight into the Obama campaign.

We have deliberately avoided academic analysis of the campaign, instead focussing practical information for all members of the

Labour party based on firsthand experience. We came up with the key areas which we felt were interesting and useful.

Our recommendations include

- better utilisation of existing resources and people
- a more structured campaign and campaign volunteer programme
- greater sharing of information with volunteers

These are the collective thoughts of over 100 members of the Labour party, we hope you find it interesting and inspiring.

**Nirmalee Wanduragala**  
**LSN- YF Ohio '08 Organiser**

## THE RISE OF WEB 2.0 CAMPAIGN

Today the internet is fast catching up with more traditional forms on media as the most desirable and trusted place to find news.

In the US, a recent poll carried out in the aftermath of the presidential elections found that the majority of Americans considered the internet their most reliable news source. Online communities and message boards allow you to spread your message via a community of like minded individuals without the bias conventional media sometimes holds.

The success of news websites such as The Huffington Post in the run up to the election in the US was a clear indication that people didn't just want to rely on age-old television and print media to tell them what was going on; they wanted the news as it happened and they want to be part of the conversation.

The UK political blogosphere pales in comparison to its American counterpart and whilst that is to be expected, what is troubling is the lack of high profile centre left bloggers that can compete with the Iain Dales and Guido Fawkes

of this world. There's not just a need to balance the debate on the web but for a rebuttal strategy to be in pace to counter those blogging against progressive ideas. Very early on the Obama team found that they needed to avoid becoming a victim of their own success on the web and by June had launched an internet 'war room'. This was a rapid response unit set up so the campaign could respond immediately to untruths as they appeared.

Growing and nurturing a network of advocates is important for any campaign but using online tools allows you empower those volunteer and activists to go that extra mile. In Ohio, we saw volunteers being able to download all the essential tools they needed to allow them to ring Democrats and

Independents in their local area from home, helping to register new supporters and organise activities in their local area. As well providing the mybarackobama.com site for volunteers to gather these tools, the campaign also encouraged many independent forums and blogs to support the work of the campaign.

This organic growth of social and viral media was witnessed everywhere from Facebook to individual web blogs giving the campaign the technological edge it needed to win. Obama's message of hope and change was a simple one and the internet allowed him to speak to an electorate that otherwise would have felt they were just spectators in this election.

The right message can go ten times further when coupled with the right methods of communication.

Proving any of this wasn't just a campaign gimmick, one of Obama's first acts as President-elect was to record his first weekly Democratic address online; and as if you would have expected anything less.

**Shruti Dudhia**