

Global Labour Online Campaigns: The next 10 Years

by Eric Lee

In November 2011, the military dictatorship in Fiji jailed two of the country's most prominent trade union leaders. Following the launch of an online campaign sponsored by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and run on the LabourStart website, some 4,000 messages of protest were sent in less than 24 hours. The government relented, the union leaders were freed, and the campaign suspended. A month earlier, Suzuki workers locked out in India waged a successful online campaign through the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) and LabourStart. Almost 7,000 messages flooded the company's inboxes, and after only a few days, a compromise was reached.

The spectacular success of those campaigns is the culmination of a decade-long process of building up the campaigning capacity of the international trade union movement - specifically that of the ITUC and the global union federations (like the IMF), and the role played by LabourStart in that process.

This short essay will focus on the rather narrow topic of global online labour campaigning, to see where we have been, where we are now, and to speculate where we go next.

The global labour movement has been doing online campaigning for a quarter of a century now. The first international trade secretariats (now called global union federations - GUFs) went online in the 1980s and have been campaigning ever since. For about a decade now, we have campaigned using a combination of mass emailing and web-based tools mostly modelled on successful campaigning websites such as Avaaz, MoveOn (USA) and 38 Degrees (UK).

Today the ITUC and GUFs tend to campaign either using LabourStart, or using a system similar to (and based on) LabourStart's custom-built software and model. As a result of this, LabourStart's mailing lists have grown steadily, from just a couple of thousands a decade ago to more than 80,000 today. Those mailing lists of trade union activists are at the heart of online labour campaigning today. They are what allow us to deliver 4,000 protest messages in 24 hours, as was done with Fiji.

But the potential is much greater than this. The ITUC, for example, claims to represent 175 million workers in more than 150 countries. The 80,000 names of activists on LabourStart's lists are a tiny fraction of that number — not even half of one

per cent. Other campaigning organizations, which have grown up out of nowhere with no built-in membership base like trade unions, have much larger audiences. For example, Avaaz claims over 10,300,000 supporters world-wide; the UK's 38 Degrees website claims 800,000 supporters. Unions have been slow to pick up on the importance of online campaigning, and as a result lag behind NGOs like these.

Why unions lag behind in the adoption of effective online campaigning technology is complicated, and varies from union to union and from country to country. As the widespread use of social networks like Facebook during the Arab Spring showed, there is no simple North/South divide here. Some of the most powerful unions in some of the richest countries use the net poorly. And there have been extremely effective net-based campaigns run by unions in places like Brazil and South Korea. The global trade union movement is already experiencing the problems of campaign fatigue and information overload. There is a fear that the campaigning model which has worked well for a decade may be faltering. And there are questions about what comes next.

What comes next?

One noticeable trend is a growth in the number of languages we campaign in. For example, in a campaign launched in November 2011 in support of locked-out Turkish metal workers, LabourStart produced versions in 13 languages (Avaaz works in 14 languages). This is far cry from the days when unions would publish online in just English, French and Spanish. Almost all the LabourStart campaigns now appear in Turkish, Arabic, Russian, Chinese and Japanese - hugely important languages for the international trade union movement but ones which a decade ago were rarely seen on global labour websites. We can expect in the next decade to see even more languages used — especially the languages of countries with growing industrial working classes, such as Thai, Tagalog, Korean, Portuguese, Indonesian and Vietnamese. A decade from now, it will not be unusual to see online campaigns running in dozens of languages.

The more sophisticated (and well-funded) civil society campaigners are increasingly targeting their campaigns, rather than creating one-size-fits-all versions. If you've shown interest in a particular subject, or come from a specific country, or speak a certain language, you can be targeted for campaigns you are most likely to show interest in. You can be approached for follow-up campaigns, as we know from experience that one campaign alone rarely solves long-running and difficult issues. At the very least, we will see the creation of extensive databases showing who has supported which campaigns, and global unions will be able to use these to build networks of activists focussed on specific subjects or regions.

How campaigns are created is also likely to change over the next decade. It's an oversimplification to say this, but basically we've moved through two phases in the past ten years. In the first period, LabourStart would approach the ITUC (and its predecessor, the ICFTU) and the GUFs and suggest an online component to their traditional offline campaigns. But in recent years, it's been the other way around, with GUFs especially coming to LabourStart with an increasing number of campaigns that need to be promoted online. As the number of campaigns being proposed grows, there are increasingly issues about prioritizing — and even turning down some requests.

A third phase could include the involvement of the campaign supporters themselves in the process — something which is already done by 38 Degrees. When there are competing issues demanding our attention, we can allow supporters to vote online for the campaigns that deserve promotion. This is admittedly quite a radical idea and one foreign to the traditions of most trade unions. Usually union campaigns are decided upon in head offices, not by a vote on the shop floor. Nevertheless, it seems likely that we will need to move in the direction of grassroots, democratic decision making — and not only because it offers a solution to the problem of prioritization. It also gives participants in the campaigns a sense of ownership, which is important as well.

The model for today's global online labour campaigns remains very PC-centric. We imagine thousands of trade unionists working in offices, sitting at their desks reading an email, clicking on a link, opening a website and filling in a form. But a decade from now, and to a certain degree even today, this is not how people will work. A significant percentage of those now learning about a global labour campaign via email are reading that email in a smartphone, such as a Blackberry or iPhone. If they click on a link in the message, the website that displays must render correctly on a very small screen, and the entering of data such as one's

name and email address, must be as simple and easy as possible. Few unions have taken this into account, but it will be essential in the years to come. As a result, it is likely that we will see the rise of small-screen-specific campaigning apps for trade unions. These apps will need to be platform-independent, able to work on all kinds of phones and tablets. And of course the model of email messages pointing to websites is itself fading, as more and more people come to use social networks such as Twitter and Facebook as their models for online communication. Among young people, studies show a declining use of email and an increasing reliance on other tools, including Blackberry Messenger (BBM) and SMS.

Unions need to take this into account when deciding how to promote their campaigns, and it's likely that a decade from now, they will need to use simultaneously a wide range of media — including social networks and instant messaging — to reach their members and supporters. Email is likely to remain part of that package, but can no longer be the only way to get the word out.

A decade from now we will probably discover other things online protest campaigns can do beyond filling up the inbox of employers and governments with protest messages. It's likely that we'll continue to do that, but we need to find other ways of putting pressure on governments and employers to respect workers' rights. One of the traditional trade union tools that has been under-utilized in recent years has been the boycott — and its opposite, the "buy union" campaigns. Both can be done more effectively online and at a fraction of the cost of old-fashioned offline versions. In a hyper-competitive market, if unions can cause a tiny fraction of sales to fall for one company, and to rise for another, this might give us the leverage that we never had in the past.

And beyond using our power as consumers to reward and punish companies, we can be inspired by the example of the Arab Spring and consider the possibility of using online campaigns not only to apply pressure online, but as a tool to bring people into the streets.

A decade from now global unions will still campaign online, but they will do so in ways radically different from how we work today — and the result will be more powerful and effective trade unions. But to achieve that, we must be open to new ideas, and new ways of working.

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