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**Obama Ground Operation 2012:
Fusion of information technology and grassroots organizing
Emancipation from Mental Slavery
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BC Editorial Board**

Barack Obama was re-elected President of the United States on November 6, 2012. His campaign organization defeated the candidate of the Republican Party, Mitt Romney, in the electoral contest where citizens of the United States voted for the leader of the country. The process of the election of the US presidency is mediated through an eighteenth century institution called the Electoral College. Under this system a candidate needs 270 electoral votes to win, insofar as the Electoral College consists of 538 electors. Basically, a candidate gets the electoral vote of a state if he or she wins that state. The states in the United States are divided into red and blue states, red for republicans and blue for the Democratic Party. Each state's entitled allotment of electors equals the number of members in its Congressional delegation: one for each member in the House of Representatives plus two for your Senators. In this way, the Presidential contest is not a real national election because the candidates can focus on the 'battleground states' in order to win. Prior to the voting on Tuesday, the Democratic Party was secure with 237 electoral votes because states such as California, New York, Illinois and Massachusetts are solidly in the camp of the Democratic Party. The Republicans were sure of approximately 191 electoral votes. Under this system it is possible for a candidate to win the popular vote yet lose the electoral college, as was the case of Al Gore in Florida in 2000. This episode in the undemocratic nature of US elections has been documented extensively.

Originally, the Electoral College was established to ensure the dominance of the slave masters in the Southern States that formed the dominant force in the early Republic. In short, the Electoral College had been instituted to short circuit the democratic process. Over the two centuries, different social forces have entered the political arena and deepened the content of the struggles for democratic participation. For the African population in the United States, it required a war to open up their right to citizenship. This right was later negated by the force of segregation and lynching. It required a massive Civil Rights Revolution to reopen the electoral process. When Barack Obama won the first election in 2008, he had acknowledged that he stood on the shoulders of the revolutionaries such as Martin Luther King Jr and the luminaries of that period.

Women, workers, gays and immigrants have all deepened the content of democratic participation in the United States. Yet, with every step taken by the popular and democratic forces, the top one per cent seeks new ways to entrench power and erode the democratic rights of the citizens. Most recently, the anti-democratic reflex was initiated through a Supreme Court decision called Citizens United that termed corporations as persons, enabling corporations to give unlimited sums to election campaigns.

The present process of elections in the United States is simultaneously rigged against ordinary persons because of the exorbitant costs to participate in these contests. It has been estimated that there was more than US \$6 billion spent on the 2012 elections. The fact that the Obama team won the election was a demonstration of the organizational capability of the Obama campaign team and the massive outpouring of a new political coalition in the United States, the alliance of blacks, Latinos, Asians, women, workers, same gender loving persons, workers and the youth. It is the opinion of this writer that the inspiration for this alliance had been deepened by the new energy of the Occupy Wall Street Movement of the past two years. This energy was driven by the fusion of the technological tools that were rolled out and the massive grassroots mobilization that had been unleashed to counter the financial advantage of the Republican Party.

In our offering this week, we analyze the ground operation for victory in 2012 and seek to draw lessons for the progressive forces as the contradictions deepen between the one per cent and the 99 per cent at this historical juncture. The Republican Party waged an unprecedented campaign of voter suppression targeting the blacks, the poor, Latinos and youth. Every obstacle that was possible was

rolled out to prevent democratic participation. But the workers, blacks, women and youths responded and rolled out a new level of coordination that merged with the Obama organization. It was this coalition that pointed to new possibilities in the United States beyond electoral politics.

The avalanche of conservative rich and racist forces that flooded and polluted the airwaves came up against new souls for the polls that did not allow hurricanes or long lines to prevent them from exercising their right to the franchise.

Context of the 2012 elections in the United States

When Barack Obama emerged as the winner of the 2008 elections in the United States, it had been agreed by political scientists and campaign organizers that the Obama machine had deployed the most sophisticated organizing apparatus in the history of the US elections. This had been the verdict of Wired Magazine but it was also acknowledged that many of the technical tools that had been unveiled in 2008 would become obsolete in 2012. In the 2008 election contest, the Obama organization had refined the use of text messaging, while signing up more than 13 million voters on e-mail lists, tapping into new forms of fundraising. The deployment of social media: Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and the use of the internet on platforms such as MyBO had set the 2008 campaign apart. That campaign had been waged after the fateful collapse of the US financial system on September 2008 and the condition of economic retrogression where the Federal Government had to intervene in the economy to bail out large scale operators in banking, insurance, automobile and the other sectors of the economy. The billions that were expended to save the top one per cent undermined the rhetoric of 'free markets.' The top capitalists had been on the defensive and Obama organized an election campaign that brought a new alliance into the political system.

David Plouffe, one of the key architects of that campaign had spelt out the strategy of the 2008 campaign in his book, ***The Audacity to Win***. I had drawn attention to the Ground Operations in my book, ***Barack Obama and Twenty First century Politics: A Revolutionary Moment in the USA***. In that book, I drew attention to the interplay between the wizardry of information technology and the ground operations that had been learnt from the Civil Rights revolution. The ground operation in that election campaign (as outlined by myself and David Plouffe) referred to the mobilization of grassroots and community forces to work on the ground in their communities to

register voters, get out the voters and energize citizens in relation to the message of the Obama campaign.

In that election campaign of 2008, the massive voter registration drives by the Obama campaign had brought into play millions of new volunteers and tens of millions of new voters. From the period of the long primary season, the campaign had embarked on the largest voter-registration drive in the history of presidential campaigns. By 2010, the Republican Party had built up these technical tools and with the massive funds available from the super PACS (political action committees) had unleashed the Tea Party elements into the US system to undermine the goals of extending democracy in the United States. With the support of the corporate media, the Tea Party forces had registered itself as a counter-revolutionary force in the body politic and had increased its influence within the ranks of the Congressional delegation of the Republican Party.

It was the appearance and vigor of the Tea Party forces which led progressive forces - especially the blacks and browns - to engage the electoral process. Angela Davis summed up the spirit of defiance in April this year at the Manning Marable conference in New York City when she commented. "If in 2008 the blacks and progressives mobilized for Obama, then in 2012, we have to mobilize for ourselves." She was referring to the need for progressives to mobilize against the massive voter suppression techniques that had been unveiled throughout the United States. New Voter ID laws, charges of electoral fraud and numerous impediments were unveiled that basically set the clock back before the period of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Even within the limitations of the Electoral College system, the elections in the United States were decisive in choosing Governors, Senators, Congressional Representatives, judges, county officers and other elected officials. At the same time there were ballot initiatives, ranging from the legalizing of marijuana for recreational use, the rights of same gender loving persons to marry, measures to limit or extend taxes, measures about GMO food and a whole host of contentious issues. In 2012, there were close to 175 measures on the ballot. These ballot initiatives increase local participation in the communities where there measures are placed on the ballot. Under these measures two states voted to legalize marijuana for recreational purposes and two states voted to give rights to marriage equality to same gender loving persons.

Fusion of grassroots activism and mobile technology: Ground operation 2012

The election season in the United States is dragged out because of the process that is called the primary. Barack Obama was the incumbent for the Democratic Party; hence there had been no primary contest. Mitt Romney emerged as the candidate for the Republican Party after a slug fest that pushed the Party even more into the conservative column. It was during that primary campaign when Romney called on some immigrants to 'self deport.' This rightward move had been underwritten by major financiers of the Republican Party. Names such as the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adleson and numerous barons from capital equity firms had made the decision that the Democratic Party could not be trusted in the White House in the midst of this capitalist crisis. US capitalists had been calling for drastic austerity measures to increase the burden on the working people.

Karl Rove (called the brain behind Bush) had founded an organization called Crossroads GPS. Together with the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity, Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, the American Future Fund, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, nearly three hundred million dollars had been spent since the beginning of 2011, targeting candidates from President Barack Obama on down to the most contested House and Senate races. Under the Supreme Court Ruling, termed Citizens United, these organizations did not have to disclose their sources of funding to the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Making a mockery of the idea of non-profits, groups such as Crossroads GPS are organized as either social welfare nonprofits under section 501(c)(4) of the tax code or, in the case of the Chamber of Commerce, as a trade association under section 501(c). Since these groups qualify for tax-exempt status, they are also exempt from disclosing their donors, which political committees are required to do. It was this dubious nature of the monied forces on the elections that led to the formulation 'dark money' in the 2012 elections. This presence of dark money ensured that the 2012 campaign was the most expensive in US history, with \$3 billion funneled into the presidential contest, \$1 billion for each of the candidates and another \$1 billion from political action committees funded by the super-rich, largely for Romney. Another \$3 billion has been spent on contests for 33 US Senate seats, 435 seats in the House of Representatives, and numerous state and local government offices.

The funds provided for Romney and the Republicans by the superpacs guaranteed that the news organizations would promote the idea that

the electoral contest was close so that the advertising dollars would come rolling in. It was the expenditure on advertising, especially on TV that was called the air war in the 2012 campaign.

The effort to mobilize grassroots campaigners to get out the vote was called the ground war. It was in this ground contest where the motivated coalition of blacks, youths, women, Latinos and workers tipped the balance to guarantee the victory of the Obama team.

Brick-By-Brick: Building a Ground Game for 270 memo from Obama campaign

The Obama team had been so confident about its capabilities that on Saturday November 3, it exposed to the world the outlines of its field operation and get out the vote operation to instill confidence in its volunteers all across the country. With the media planting the idea that the Romney campaign was gaining momentum, the Obama team rolled out the figures of the numbers of volunteers that it had deployed in the 'battleground states.' As noted in the introduction, the bulk of the campaigning for the 2012 elections had been confined to the states where the electoral votes were in contention. There were 10-11 such states - Ohio, Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Florida, Colorado, Wisconsin, Michigan, and, Virginia. Of these states both parties had highlighted Ohio as a must win and as a result millions of dollars were poured into this state along with hundreds of thousands of grassroots volunteers.

Ohio was important for another major reason; it would be a test of the new alliance in US politics. After 2011, when the Republican Governor had placed a ballot initiative to roll back collective bargaining, Ohio became another testing ground for the alliance between organized workers and the black oppressed in the United States.

The memo on November 3 from the Obama team, that was meant to stiffen the nerve of the volunteers noted that,

....., as our volunteer Neighborhood Team Leaders opened 5,117 get-out-the-vote (GOTV) staging locations in the battleground states that will decide this election, they began to execute the final phase of a ground game unlike any American politics has ever seen. These staging locations are even more localized versions of our field offices - set up in supporters' homes, businesses or any area that can serve as a central hub for a team's GOTV activities in the final days.

From these hyper-local Obama hubs, volunteers have signed up for 698,799 shifts to get out the vote over the final four days of this campaign, a number that grows by the minute as organizers continue assigning supporters who have expressed an interest in volunteering. These volunteer-led GOTV staging locations embody what this campaign has been all about since we started organizing for change in 2007. The Neighborhood Team Leaders who are running our get-out the- vote operation have been working in these neighborhoods for months, if not years.

Since we launched the re-election campaign in April 2011, those teams have been focused like a Laser beam on three things: 1) expanding the electorate by registering new voters, 2) persuading undecided voters, and then 3) turning out our supporters. On all three fronts, these volunteers have blown away our most optimistic expectations.”

This press release pointed out that the Obama teams registered 1,792,261 voters in key battleground states - nearly double the number of voters the Obama campaign registered in 2008. “At the start of GOTV weekend, our volunteers have made 125,646,479 personal phone calls or door knocks that resulted in conversations with voters - not counting robo calls on auto-dialers, mail, literature drops or any other non-volunteer, non-personal contacts.”

These figures pointed to the reality that by election day 2012, the Obama campaign had contacted roughly one out of every 2.5 people in the entire country since the 2008 election. It was this massive get out the vote operation in the battleground states staged from 5,100 Get Out The Vote stations operated by more than 700,000 volunteers that guaranteed victory. Of the battleground states identified above, there was only one where the Democratic Party did not prevail ensuring that there were many pathways to victory in 2012. This was the state of North Carolina. Very early the campaign had calculated that based on their path to victory they could not afford to expend the energy of Barack Obama to campaign in North Carolina. While the Republicans poured millions of dollars into Florida, Virginia and Ohio, the Obama team had diversified, setting up a firewall among the working class in the old industrial rustbelt to bring out the class character of the campaign. It was this calculation that ensured victory for Obama in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa.

Fusion of mobile technology and grassroots organizing

When Jim Messina had rolled out the pathways to victory at the Democratic Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina in September, the collective wisdom of the top organizers of the Party was that the Democratic Party could not match the financial resources of the Koch Brothers and Crossroads GPS. Together with the resources from the oil and gas companies who had decided that the Obama administration had to go, the political climate in the USA had been so skewed to the right of center that during the debates neither party had discussed the issue of Global Warming and the need for repair of the environment. Hurricane Sandy inserted itself in the society in the last week of the campaign and pointed to the fact that global warming cannot be ignored.

Earlier in the campaign, the Obama team had rolled out the Dashboard (data mining) application that was to be the basic tool of the volunteers in the field. This dashboard program, that had been specifically developed by the campaign, was built off technology used by the campaign in 2008 and was meant to replicate a campaign field office, allowing volunteers to do phone banking, organize events and talk to campaign leaders from their laptops or smartphones.

It was in Ohio where the fusion of volunteers and the new technology was rolled out from 32 field offices in the state with Dashboard fusing a model of organizing that was called the "snowflake" model. In simple terms, it was the way in which the lines between paid organizers and volunteers were blurred. Each paid staffer created and collaborated with an expanding network of volunteers. One field organizer was supposed to recruit five unpaid neighborhood team leaders. These five volunteers would recruit five others. It was this process of scaling up that was called the snowflake model of organizing. The organizing unit of the snowflake model was the neighborhood teams.

From the self-organization of the Civil Rights period to the 2012 campaign

Marshall Ganz had introduced the concept of Camp Obama to the 2008 campaign. Some readers will remember that Marshall Ganz had learnt his organizing skills while working with SNCC in the South in the 60's. He had studied how SNCC had organized in the neighborhoods in Mississippi in the days of segregation and lynching. After the 2008 elections, David Plouffe, Jim Messina and Stephanie Cutter had integrated the campaign closer with the thinking of Steve Jobs (Apple) Schmidt of Google and Steven Spielberg. Marshall Ganz has been

lamenting the top down flavor and corporate interface that had moved the campaign out of the political arena after Obama was elected president in 2008. Marshall Ganz is of the view that the campaign team should have remained mobilized during the crisis of the banks in 2009. There is quite an illuminating article in *Bloomberg News* that outlined how Jim Messina interfaced with Steven Spielberg of Hollywood, "[Messina Consults Jobs to Spielberg in Crafting Obama's Campaign.](#)"

Those from the classical class analysis point of view would call the contest of 2012 a battle between capital from information technology and entertainment on one side and the capital equity forces of Wall Street on the other. From the safety of British journalistic base, one writer called the 2012 elections, "The Triumph of Conservatism." The lines were not that straightforward but the Obama campaign itself, in order to ingratiate itself with the working class had campaigned that Mitt Romney belonged to the class of corporate raiders. The campaign had successfully used Romney's role in Bain capital to frame Romney before the electorate.

Neighborhood teams

In the memo that was published on November 3 the Obama team noted,

"Neighborhood Team Leaders opened their staging locations this morning, they began logging into our state-of-the-art reporting system, officially launching their GOTV hubs. Unlike campaigns of the past, our volunteers are not driving to some large office miles from their homes and handed a phone and a call sheet. Instead, Canvass Captains, Phone Bank Captains and scores of local volunteers will be knocking on the doors of the very voters they registered, have been talking to for months and know personally. And they will be directing them to polling locations in their communities - the schools their kids go to, the places of worship they attend each week and community centers they know well."

The fusion of field targeting and decentralized volunteering online was on display in Ohio, Florida, Virginia and Colorado. The Obama campaign had set in motion over 700,000 volunteers. The training of these volunteers focused on delivering skills necessary to maximize the time and effort in the contact with real voters. Volunteers got logged on to Dashboard and used a phone call program that

pinpointed residents according to their past voting behavior. In a state such as Ohio where there had been a fierce ballot initiative over collective bargaining, the neighborhood teams focused on mobilizing those working class forces that had become active in opposing restrictions on collective bargaining rights for unions. The battles over collective bargaining provided the major antidote to the politics of the Tea Party in the USA. From the close of the registration period, the team leaders had been working out of 'boiler rooms' preparing for the get out the vote operation and the early vote barrage. It was in this voting process where there was a test of the resilience and tenacity of the black and the poor against the conservatives who were bent on suppressing the vote.

The fusion of field targeting along with the national inspiration that had been derived from the Occupy Wall Street Movement created another moment in US politics. This moment was sealed when the Republicans intensified efforts to suppress the black and Latino votes.

Motivation of the Black and Brown in the United States

Throughout the campaign, the corporate media had been trumpeting the idea that blacks were disappointed with the Obama Presidency and were not enthusiastic about the elections. These claims were quickly dispelled during the registration period and more so after the early voting period when the independent mobilization of blacks registered itself in the US political system one more time. Black churches again became centers of political mobilization. One had to listen to black radio stations to see how the very same tools of social media were being harnessed to stiffen the resolve of voters in particular precincts. When voters were standing in lines for six to eight hours, there were volunteers dispatched with water and chairs for the elders. By the date of the elections, 93 per cent of the eligible black voters had voted for Barack Obama. The Black working people had calculated correctly that the voter suppression was the thin edge of the wedge of new forms of repression that would come from a Republican-controlled White House. Seventy percent of the Latino voters supported Obama. With the combination of the youth vote, the votes of the same gender loving persons, workers and women, the elections of 2012 cemented a growing alliance in the United States. The major challenge is for this alliance to exercise its influence outside of the period of elections. Progressives will have to be engaged to ensure that the corporate section of the campaign does not violate the privacy of millions of citizens whose information had been stored for the use of the campaign. Data mining by corporations pose many dangers for

consumers. Whether the Obama administration will be held accountable to its 'rhetoric' about defending the 'middle class' will not be dependent on politicians, but on a new, conscious citizenry.

This was going to be the new test of politics as Obama celebrated victory on November 7. One indication of the new struggle after the elections was put on display on November 7 when the Dow Jones Industrial Index of the US stock market dropped over 300 points. During the campaign, Wall Street had threatened that there would be a strike of capital. This threat will now have to be grasped by the alliance that voted for Barack Obama. This alliance will have to learn that the Obama campaign does not have a monopoly on the technology for organizing.

Elections have consequences. The peace movement can learn a lot of lessons to be able to build on the political consciousness and networks that have been set in motion to defeat the superpacs.

A clear and determined peace and justice movement can build on the new coalition to make a new direction in the politics of the USA. There is no timetable for a revolution.

In the meantime, whenever a team from the National Endowment for Democracy from the USA travels to another state to monitor elections, citizens should query the NED, what are you doing about voter suppression in the USA?

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