

# Free Radicals

## Youth-led political organising in the UK: lessons, challenges and prospects

### Introduction

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History tells us that young people have been at the forefront of many social and political movements across the world, from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the US civil rights movement to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and, more recently in the UK, the student-led response to the increase in tuition fees. These historical movements show that young people have the potential to facilitate radical political change that goes beyond the forms of political participation prescribed for them by government. Over the last ten years, there has been a dramatic decline in the levels of political empowerment of the young and excluded. A third of unskilled workers and of the unemployed do not take part in any political activity. In the last general election, young people were half as likely to vote as their parents or grandparents.

Despite the barriers, young people across the UK are challenging the status quo. From diverse communities, they are campaigning together to protect youth rights against increasing levels of police harassment, challenge the effects of 'preventing violent extremism' policies on young Muslims and resist the detention and deportation of friends seeking asylum. Others are pushing their politicians to recognise the underlying causes of youth violence, educational exclusion or the rise of the British National Party (BNP) in their neighbourhoods. And, of course, the recent student-led demonstrations have shown that young people are challenging the coalition government's policies on education cuts and the deepening of educational inequality.

At present, it remains to be seen whether these campaigns have the potential to coalesce into a broader,

sustainable political movement. There is also a question about the class make-up of today's youth activism: are young people from poorer communities being politicised or is today's activism mimicking the student protests of the 1960s and so likely to end in a conservative rather than radical generation of politicians?

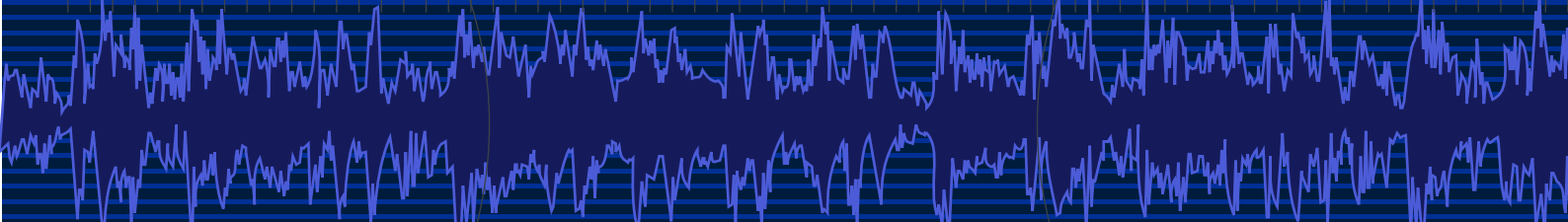
Free Radicals is a new organisation which aims to build the collective power of young people in poor, largely working-class communities, building political knowledge and organising skills in order to make social and political change. As part of this programme, Free Radicals has undertaken this research to:

- 1) Identify the common approaches and methods that are shared by practitioners working with young people to develop political leadership;
- 2) Learn from radical approaches from the past that can be translated into the current context;
- 3) Recognise the current gaps in political organising among young people and youth-led programmes.

### Historical context

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Over the last decade, economic inequality has deepened while hyper-consumerism and rabid individualism have intensified. Working-class communities are at the sharp end of police stop and search practices, while the government's Preventing Violent Extremism programme has heightened a sense of claustrophobia felt by many young Muslims. Media stories of 'feral youths' terrorising neighbourhoods, immigrants 'stealing British jobs', 'illegal' asylum seekers and young Muslim 'terrorists', and the government policies that go hand in hand with this imagery, further undermine young people's confidence in



themselves and in their communities. As the economic collapse impacts on already pressurised neighbourhoods and politicians seek to divert attention away from, for example, the loss of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or rising youth unemployment, many youth groups feel that an organised response is essential, not just to resist cuts but also to shape a vision of a different society.

At this point of political rupture, when innovative methods are being deployed by young people to challenge cuts to public services and tax avoidance by corporations, it is more than ever essential to consider what can be learnt from the past. Young people have been strongly present in grassroots political organising and action throughout the world, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Understanding their role and significance in past movements for political and social change in the UK, South Africa and the US will not only shed light on their capacities and strategies but also give an indication of their motives and influences – both domestic and global. It may also contribute to an understanding of how young people can be engaged in transformative social and political change in a sustained and powerful way in Britain today.

## **UK context**

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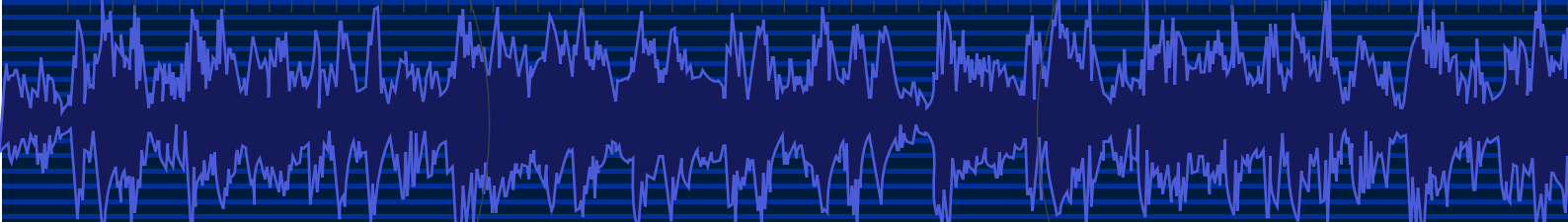
In 1981, thirty urban areas of Britain erupted in popular resistance. Although the ‘riots’ began in Brixton, where African-Caribbean youths were opposing racialised police oppression, by July, class was the main unifying factor, with black and white youths rising up together in Toxteth. Much of the resistance was a relatively spontaneous response to the police, in particular the ‘sus’ laws, which allowed for the police to ‘swamp’ an area and conduct intimidating searches en masse, particularly of African-Caribbean youths. But the poverty and unemployment exacerbated by Thatcher’s monetarist economic policies provided the wider context. One community worker observed: ‘It is obvious why people went for the police, but there were exact reasons why each of those buildings was hit. The bank for obvious

reasons, the Racquets Club because the judges use it, Swainbanks furniture store because people felt he was ripping off the community.’

The uprisings led to the repeal of the ‘sus’ laws, thus demonstrating the impact that young people could have in the UK. But they also prompted the Thatcher government to embark on efforts to systematically depoliticise working-class communities, particularly young people, whom Thatcher saw as an ‘enemy within’, much like the miners. This was achieved, first, through the drawing of ‘race equality’ organisations and initiatives into the orbit of local authorities, where their radicalism could be more easily quelled, and, second, through the increasing management of formal and informal education by central government: for example, through the introduction of a schools national curriculum. Youth and community work, which had occasionally provided learning spaces for adults and young people to work collectively to develop political consciousness, was one obvious target.

The emergence of a ‘politically manageable’ voluntary sector and the associated depoliticisation of youth became even more significant under New Labour. Following Labour’s 1997 landslide election victory, the Blair government championed the discourse of community involvement and active citizenship. Central and local government were tasked with involving constituents in decision-making. Poor communities were encouraged to have more of a say at a local level through programmes such as Neighbourhood Renewal and New Deal for Communities. Citizenship education was introduced in schools; programmes such as the Youth Opportunities Fund enabled some young people to have a say about how resources should be distributed in their areas.

Yet, paradoxically, the more that government appeared to want to reconnect with citizens, the bigger the gulf grew. The solution, it was argued, was more ‘involvement’. But an overemphasis on vapid forms of consultation and engagement in decision-making, often devoid of



political meaning, served to drive a wedge between young people and the political process. Citizens were over-asked on the small questions without gaining real influence over the big decisions. There was perhaps no greater illustration of this than the government's decision to participate in the 2003 war on Iraq despite the protests of millions – confirming in the minds of many a sense of powerlessness. In such circumstances, the rhetoric of 'involvement' has tended to mask the void in political participation and activism, particularly for the young, working classes.

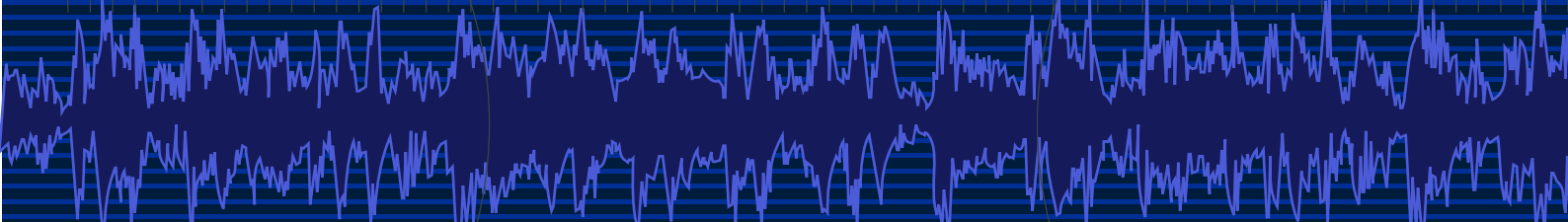
Compounding this problem was the fact that under Labour, 'youth participation' had largely become the responsibility of local authorities; this ensured that young people's responses to 'local and national issues' were managed internally by government officers employed to facilitate young people's engagement on local issues, which often prevented an independent, organised political response from young people themselves. In addition, many front-line organisations, including youth groups, were hamstrung by conditions placed on statutory funding, which increasingly required youth workers to target 'at risk' groups or individuals. This meant that, rather than working with young people to look at and then challenge the structural causes of violence, youth work became based far more on outcomes such as decreasing youth violence – an approach that can be seen clearly in, for example, the Mayor of London's Mentoring Scheme. This, of course, detracts from youth work that is focused on relationship-building, critical engagement on issues faced by young people, and training young people to understand how to mobilise their collective power to address issues of social justice. What political engagement was promoted by local government and funders – for example, the Youth Parliament – was highly limited, ideologically and methodologically, often mirroring adult structures that were clearly dysfunctional. As a consequence, the impoverished and marginalised youth of Britain have become increasingly disempowered and disenfranchised.

It is not simply that they do not feel their interests are represented; it is more that they are prevented from representing themselves.

The New Labour government not only deepened economic inequality; it also solidified a hyper-consumerism and rabid individualism, continuing a process that has been unfolding in Britain over the last thirty years, slowly but surely eroding collective political engagement and popular democracy. Even more worryingly, it sold young people a value system in which money, possessions, appearances and fame were king. Many young people from deprived communities have been stripped of the belief that they can bring about change in their community – let alone believe that another world is possible.

As cuts to services and welfare for young people become increasingly pronounced under the current coalition government, the potential for young people's political empowerment is further reduced. Austerity measures have already seen the removal of government funding for youth centres, such as Community Links in Plashet Park, east London, and the termination of funding for Newham College's construction department.

These cuts not only serve to limit young people's access to recreation and career development but also give the impression that government is not concerned with the needs of young people. Such reductions in services are made worse by a steady increase in income inequality over the past ten years and by proposed cuts to the EMA and Aim Higher schemes which facilitated access to further and higher education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Seen as a move by the government to make further and higher education the preserve of the rich, this particular policy has stimulated widespread opposition. Moreover, underpayment of taxes by large businesses, such as Vodafone and the Arcadia Group, indicates the free rein given to pushing consumerism at the expense of social responsibilities. Market



fundamentalism, and the associated indifference to the ‘negative externalities’ it produces, is mirrored by many young people’s obsession with consumer culture.

Although evidence suggests that young people have been disempowered in a number of ways, there are, nevertheless, pockets of resistance within marginalised working-class, black, Muslim and other communities. Occasionally this resistance is organised into groups of one sort or another, which, in their variety, offer important insights into the thinking and motives of young organisers in Britain, and their potential to produce radical change.

## Projects researched

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Six organisations were looked at to help gain a better picture of youth-led political organising outside mainstream structures in the UK today. They were presented with open-ended questions about political organising, methodologies, ideologies, motivations, challenges, achievements, future plans and identity/ group demographics. The groups worked with were:

1) **SONS OF MALCOLM (SOM)**: A youth group based in west London which draws on the Black Power politics and anti-imperialism of Malcom X and the Black Panther Party. The group uses an analysis drawn from these African-American political movements of the 1960s to campaign against modern imperialism and raise awareness of social issues in local communities, for example, examining the impact of hip-hop music and culture. The SOM website explains: ‘Inspired by the principles of Malcom X/Malik El-Hajj Shabazz. A ‘Third Worldist’ perspective focusing on the increasing pace of south-south co-operation which is challenging and defeating US hegemony, and the struggles of those oppressed by neo-colonialism and white supremacy (racism) who fight for their social, political and cultural freedom “by any means necessary”’.

The young people with whom SOM works feel they are not represented in mainstream structures. They

feel that the subjects they want to explore between themselves and their peers are not present in mainstream spaces and that their identity is not reflected. They meet once a week to talk about issues of their choosing and, from these discussions, come up with plans of action. For example, they have organised a series of events focusing on historical and topical issues, mixed with media, music and poetry. The group’s organisers believe that, by providing an experienced support structure, they are having an impact in greatly increasing the young participants’ intellectual and organising confidence.

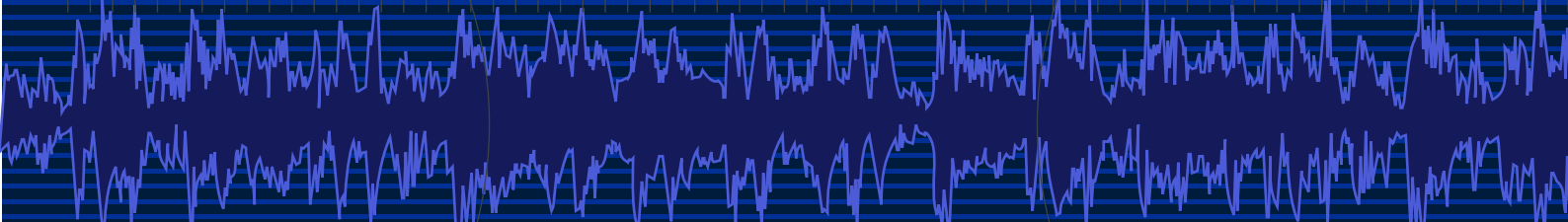
For example, one initiative involving thirty young people, called ‘Team FTO’ (‘Fight the oppression’), had no support in terms of ideas or discussion until the young people met the SOM group, which organised for them to go to a high profile hip hop debate at the British Library. In another example, a group of young women who were poets and spoken word artists wanted to develop their skills. After meeting with SOM, they were helped to set up their own writers’ group for young women, which, it was hoped, would be a way to inspire and guide other young women into this form of cultural expression. This project – entitled ‘Queen Sheba writers’ – is now being developed.

This typifies the basic approach of the SOM group, which is to support ideas and initiatives that young people already have and suggest ways to take them further.

### 2) **YMCA CENTRAL HERTS at SPACE**

**HATFIELD (SH)**: Based in a youth club called ‘Space Hatfield’, YMCA Central Herts is a youth club linked to the YMCA that organises along trade union lines to help young people in work to campaign for their rights. The youth club also looks at international issues, such as worker struggles in Latin America. The organisers run a youth centre, primarily aiming to offer a place to be but, also, to informally educate through discussion and project work. One of the things the young people want out of the centre is an opportunity to learn more about the world ‘beyond





the fairly dry world view that school offers'. The youth club continuously tries to stimulate debate about what is going on locally, nationally and internationally. It is currently trying to find ways to encourage better interaction between young people and the wider community, getting service-providers and other groups to come to the centre to join discussions and activities. The work is often subtle and is probably more aptly described as 'journeying with' young people rather than attempting to lead them on any particular path.

The organisers of YMCA Central Herts highlighted the centrality of trade union work: 'We are active in their trade unions. It's fairly well known and understood that young people don't tend to join trade unions, often due to a lack of understanding about what they are for. The media make it seem like unions are for striking. But young people do suffer discrimination in the workplace and so engaging them in unions is about trying to change that, getting young people to learn how to be politically active and understanding that they could be a powerful force. The way we are engaging young people is through trying to make unions relevant, making links with other movements in which young people have traditionally been active, such as international issues. We've also developed materials which educate young people from an early age on what a trade union is. However, I am sceptical of how this can be rolled out in any great way.

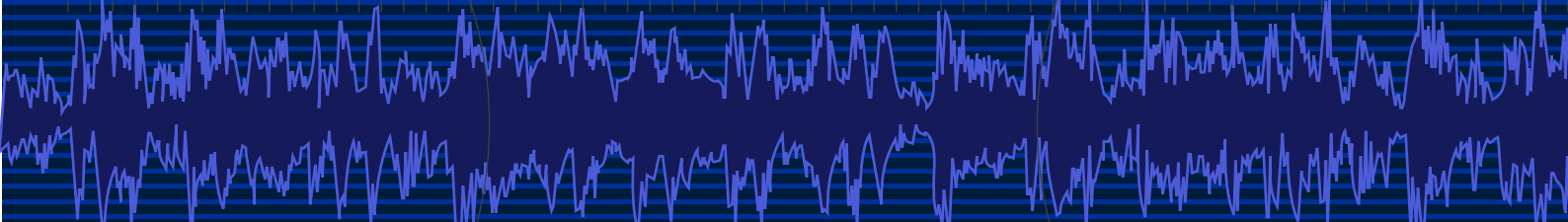
'Within the union, the focus is currently on unemployment, looking at how cuts are impacting young people's prospects financially, psychologically, developmentally, etc. Obviously, issues tend to focus around the workplace, so the National Minimum Wage, and in particular the lower wages permitted for young people, is something around which young members want to organise. However, it is a struggle – often young members have little power within their own unions. The TUC congress this year passed the first ever young members motion which called for campaigning against inequality within the minimum wage and a campaign for a living wage for all, regard-

less of age. However, the TUC had its reservations about this, negotiating down many of the calls for action – illustrating the ongoing battle for these issues to be taken seriously.

'Within the youth club, we try to develop young people's general communication skills – starting right from the basics, so that young people are better able to learn from each other and listen to each other. It's also about encouraging young people to be more "aware" of where their ideas come from – raising consciousness of why they think what they think, if that makes sense. That might mean looking at how the media influences us, looking at who in our lives influence us.

'Within the union, there are actually courses offered for young members to try to give them the skills to organise, understand, be active, etc. The courses in themselves often involve learning from other more senior members of the movement, listening to inspirational speakers, usually in a residential setting. Often, training will incorporate learning about international movements, such as those in Latin America – to explore current and real alternative systems, getting young people to think more broadly and see how their lives are influenced by things happening all over the world. My criticism of this work is that there is no support to go beyond this, to guide or mentor young people so they are able to use these skills.

'The voice of young members in the trade union movement is growing, new structures are setting in and there is a willingness to accept young people as a group with specific equality issues relating to being young. However, I do think that there is much to be done in recognising that young people need to be listened to not because "they are the future" but because they are living now, with experiences of injustice and discrimination, and with their own insights and knowledge. I can clearly see that we are having an impact because of the changes taking place; however, the real test will be in changing or influencing policy. A lot of young people within the union movement and other organisations are currently



campaigning to save youth services. The impact of this will be a good indicator of where the youth movement is at.

‘I would like young people to realise they could have power, know how to use it and be aware of their rights. I would like young people to be able to understand the role the media plays, positively or negatively, in shaping their perceptions. A lot of the young people I work with don’t really “do” opinions, often saying “I don’t know”, waiting for you to feed them an answer they can agree with. They don’t even try to think about it. I want young people to be more comfortable with forming their own opinions and ideas.’

### 3) **NUS BLACK STUDENTS CAMPAIGN (BSC):**

The NUS BSC comes from a long history of political organising by immigrant communities in the UK. Because historically trade unions often did not address issues of racial discrimination, many Black workers formed their own separate organisations, their own spaces for learning, monitoring police harassment and defending themselves from far-Right violence on the streets. These organisers contribute to the BSC by speaking at its conferences and providing policy advice; hence this history of Black political organising has had a strong influence on the BSC’s own approach.

(The NUS BSC uses the term ‘Black’ to refer to a political identity shared by people of African, Arab, Asian, Caribbean and Latin American ancestry. The word is used here with an upper case letter ‘B’ to distinguish it from the conventional, narrower use of the term ‘black’ to refer to people of African ancestry.)

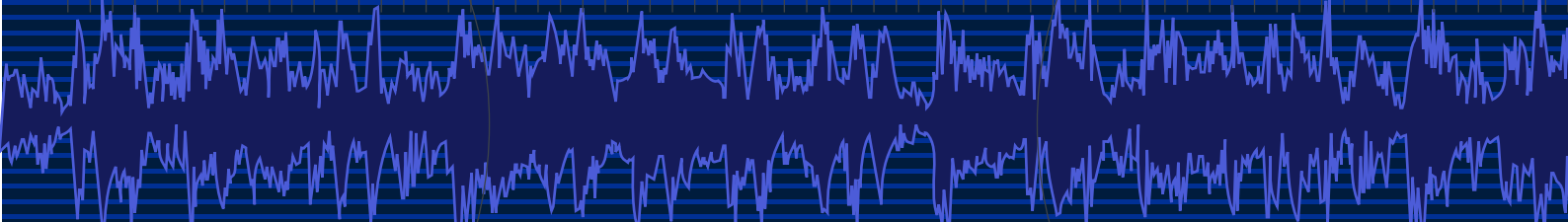
Although the NUS BSC is closely affiliated with the National Union of Students, which is a very mainstream body, the BSC has autonomy in representing students of African, Asian and Latin American descent in both further and higher education. Many of these students take up a political stance that is at odds with the policies of the NUS, leading to potential conflict. However, as a democratic organisation, the BSC encourages Black students to be

politically active, not just in the formal structures of their local unions and in local political activity, but also through informal methods, such as protest, boycott and peaceful direct action. The BSC seeks to offer support to Black students organising, with different members of the committee offering insights, understanding and dedication to different forms of political organising.

Across the UK, and especially in Luton, Bradford and Stoke, young people are concerned with the activities of far-Right groups, such as the BNP and the English Defence League (EDL). When these groups march, the BSC helps students locally to build support for counter-demonstrations, organising coaches of students from around the country to come down in solidarity and raising awareness at our conferences and other events. The BSC works closely with other campaign groups fighting racism, such as Unite Against Fascism.

The BSC also expresses a commitment to anti-imperialism, as a result of the strength of feeling on this issue among many of the students with whom it works. It helps to organise students’ attendance at protests against attacks on Palestinians and BSC committee members have travelled to Gaza as part of efforts to break the siege and deliver humanitarian aid. The BSC states that it supports all forms of peaceful direct action, such as the protests outside the Israeli embassy following the attacks on Gaza in January 2009. Regular committee meetings are held to discuss international issues such as this, in order to ask how they are likely to affect Black students and what concerns have been raised by Black students or student campaign groups. Committee members are elected annually by Black students at the BSC summer conference; they can raise any issues which have been brought to their attention and suggest possible actions.

Overall, the BSC sees itself as a facilitator of political organising. Its conferences bring Black student activists together from around the country, while regional caucuses allow for Black students in the same region



to co-ordinate their campaigns and actions. Workshops covering different issues, usually run by Black students themselves, help to develop understanding, ideas and tactics for political action on a certain issue. For example, when over twenty universities from around the country occupied spaces on their campus in solidarity with the people of Gaza, Black students from Manchester University ran a workshop in which students could share ideas, experiences and future plans related to Palestine. This kind of networking between activists helped to strengthen the national campaign for international peace and solidarity in the Middle East. And it often results in students visiting other cities to assist with political actions, building on links made at conferences.

4) **CEASEFIRE MAGAZINE:** *Ceasefire* magazine was set up in 2002 by students at Nottingham University in response to the prospect of an invasion of Iraq. By 2005, it had become an independent magazine covering politics, art and activism; it was sold on and off campus, as well as having online content. The independence of the magazine allowed it to become a forum for students to explore political issues which would not have been addressed in the official publications affiliated to the student union. For example, *Ceasefire* did a 'Q&A' feature on anarchism and had articles with headlines such as, 'What we can learn from Black Power'.

In 2008, Hicham Yezza, one of *Ceasefire's* editors, and Rizwaan Sabir, a contributor to the magazine, were wrongfully arrested. Rizwaan was applying for a PhD in terrorism studies and, for his research, had downloaded from the US Department of Justice a document entitled the *Al Qaeda Manual*. Rizwaan sent the document for printing to Hicham, who was at the time an administrator at the university. Another member of staff informed the police, thinking that Hicham was using the material for illegal purposes. Both Hicham and Rizwaan were arrested and detained for a week and their personal possessions were seized, including many copies of *Ceasefire*.

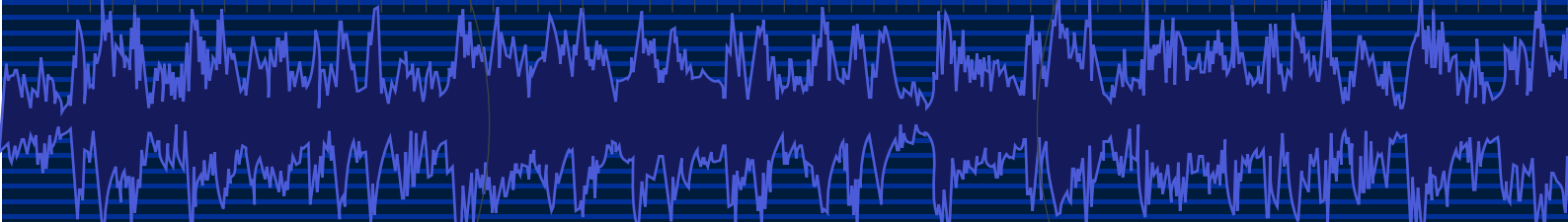
They were eventually released without charge. But

Hicham, an Algerian national, was re-arrested under immigration law. Despite living, studying and working in the UK for over thirteen years, police claimed that Hicham had not renewed his visa correctly that year and had therefore been deceiving his employers at the university. Hicham was detained at various immigration detention centres whilst awaiting a hearing before being electronically tagged and released on bail.

During this time, *Ceasefire* put the arrests on the front cover of the magazine and increased sales by publicising the issue on campus. Contact details of people concerned with the issue were taken and meetings for the campaign to free Hicham began. These meetings did not have a chair or any leadership; however, a minute-taker and facilitator were assigned and regularly rotated. Decisions were made consensually, with strict facilitation ensuring everyone got an opportunity to speak. Different hand signals helped to communicate consensus, disagreement, information requests and other practical considerations. Letters to university lecturers and management were written and sent off. Posters and flyers were designed and printed by small working groups. Other working groups contacted local activist groups, recruited student support and the local MP Alan Simpson, who was very supportive.

The largest-ever demonstration on the Nottingham University campus was held in support of Hicham, to protest against his and Rizwaan's treatment and against the behaviour of the university, the police and the Home Office. Staff, students and community members gathered on campus to hear lecturers deliver public readings of the *Qaeda manual*. Alan Simpson delivered a speech strongly condemning the actions of the university and police.

The university issued several statements which sought to defend its actions. And it refrained from acknowledging Hicham's contributions to the university and local community over the past decade. This raised further concerns with the students, staff and alumni, in particular with international students and members



of the university's Muslim community.

After thirty-three days of detention and a dozen moves between five different locations across the country, Hicham's application to be released on bail was successful – despite strong opposition from the Home Office. He was released on the same day and welcomed by supporters on his return.

The campaign then launched a programme of events to raise awareness of Hicham's situation and to step up fundraising efforts to enable Hicham to fight his case. The programme included lectures, roundtables, gigs, sporting tournaments and artistic exhibitions. A number of high-profile politicians, artists and public figures agreed to attend and lend their support.

Hicham was eventually jailed for three months on immigration charges; thereafter his movement was restricted by the requirement to report regularly to an immigration centre in the east Midlands. He is now free from these restrictions and has the right to live and work in the UK.

The editors of *Ceasefire* also engaged young people in political organising by setting up the Nottingham Peace Conference. Although there was almost no budget, organisers managed to get the main university building free of charge for an entire Saturday. Posters were printed out using money from magazine sales and from the Nottingham Student Peace Movement. Speakers included activists such as Milan Rai, who edits *Peace News*, and participants from Amnesty International, Scientists for Peace and *New Internationalist* magazine. Most of *Ceasefire*'s contributors have a radical anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist politics but, by inviting contributions from more mainstream progressive organisations, an opportunity was provided to the wider student population to familiarise themselves with the peace movement.

*Ceasefire* has also been used as a space in which young people argued the case for forms of direct action. When Israel bombed Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009, students at the University of Nottingham occupied a lecture theatre on campus. *Ceasefire* was given out free of charge so that young people unfamiliar with the issues, from Nottingham and beyond, could have a young person's perspective on what was happening and why.

5) **YOUNG MUSLIM VOICES (YMV):** Since 9/11 and 7/7, the political and media spotlight has focused sharply on Muslim communities. Read any newspaper or watch television and there is only one story when it comes to young Muslims in Britain – the story that revolves around the danger of their being 'extremists', the story of their 'radicalisation', the story that says they are potential 'terrorists'. Yet there are few opportunities for young Muslims to speak out about how they feel in this heated political climate. In 2007, youth workers at Islington Council set up Young Muslim Voices (YMV). Its aim was to empower young Muslims to challenge stereotypes and draw political attention to the issues affecting their lives – the real issues of inequality, discrimination and hunger for social change. The project sought to build community leadership skills by giving young people the opportunity to lead a series of events and projects, including an anti-racism football tournament, a documentary film-making project, a radio show and a youth-led conference. What emerged was an alternative story of what it means to be a young Muslim living in London. It is the story of young people trying to find a place for themselves in a society that looks at them with suspicion; the story of young people confident and eager to engage on social and political issues yet frustrated by the barriers their participation runs up against.





## Action and impact

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Despite the barriers described above, youth facilitators and young people have been working to build the skills, knowledge and confidence of young people, in order to give them the belief that they can effect change. For many – particularly those excluded from school or those who have grown up under the shadow of the ‘war on terror’ – turning anger and frustration into effective political and social activism can take time. But the effects can be electric.

Over the past ten years, young people have been increasingly engaged in challenging UK and US foreign policy, particularly the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Solidarity with the people of Palestine in the Occupied Territories has also spurred many youth groups to diverge from mainstream political approaches, advocating instead direct action and civil disobedience. Young Muslims and non-Muslims are effectively leading campaigns to challenge discrimination and stereotypes fuelled by the preventing violent extremism agenda. Young asylum seekers are fighting deportation, whilst others are challenging their council to recognise the underlying causes of youth violence. Still others are simply struggling to make their voices heard. All of them are united by frustration at a political system that does not hear the voices of young people. But each has a strong desire to make a difference and a belief that, together, they can, not only in their immediate community but also in society as a whole.

Organisers in the UK have used a wide variety of methods to engage young people. Often they reject theoretical analysis of their methods, dismissing such efforts as an elite attempt to professionalise grass roots politics. This is as true in recent years as it has been elsewhere in earlier periods – for example, among social movement activists in South Africa or among the Black Power movement in the US.

Nonetheless, observing the organising methods and approaches of both past movements and current organ-

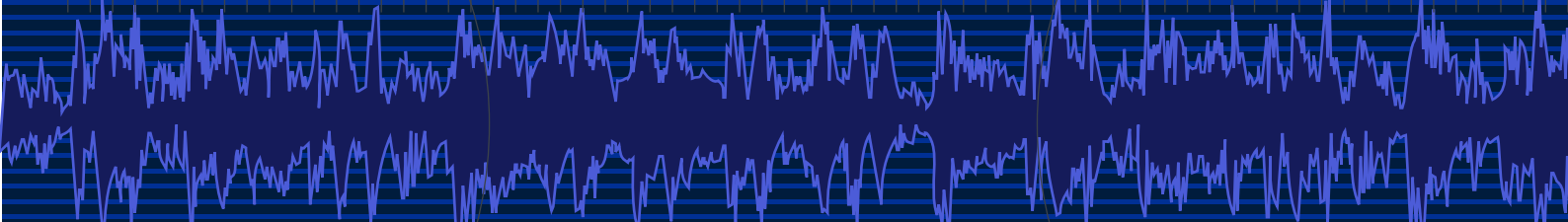
## YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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The role of young people in the US civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s is a significant source of inspiration for Free Radicals. The civil rights movement changed the face of ‘race relations’ in the US and, indirectly, in many parts of the world. This was brought about through non-violent protest, as well as through legal action. The *Brown v. Board of Education* supreme court case of 1954 deemed it unlawful for schools to be segregated by race; but it took direct forms of protest to translate this decision into practice. Other achievements of the movement included the dismantling of racial segregation in restaurants, public transport and professional sports. Equally important, though less tangible, was the raising of political consciousness, particularly among African Americans, not only of racism but also of other forms of oppression.

Civil rights activists took action in the form of the famous bus boycotts and the picketing of the homes of judges who were members of whites-only clubs. One of the most famous acts of civil disobedience was ‘free riding’, in which students would join other activists in riding on buses to segregated states, often facing arrest. Other forms of civil disobedience included ‘read-ins’ in segregated libraries. Actions often led to students suffering physical abuse from the police – requiring a dedication on the part of activists which convinced many civil rights organisations to focus their recruitment predominantly on young people.

Action by young people was also international in scope – for example, the youth wing of one of the leading civil rights organisations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), pushed for anti-Vietnam war motions to be passed and promoted a Black Power and Pan-Africanist agenda. Indeed, the civil rights movement had a powerful influence on different movements across the globe and gave rise to forms of international solidarity. The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa was closely linked to the civil rights movement in the US – and both had an impact on young people in Britain fighting against racism.



isers in the UK helps to inform an approach for Free Radicals. All the groups and individuals covered in this study are in agreement that the sharing of ideas and experiences between different organisers is helpful. Indeed, some of the UK organisers interviewed (*Ceasefire*, SH, LC, SOM) themselves cited radical theorists as informing their methods.

Despite the profound differences of context, there are a number of common elements among the methods used by successful organisers in the past, such as those in South Africa fighting apartheid or in the US fighting for civil rights, and organisers in the UK today. These common elements can be described as:

- Action-focused, long-term vision of change
- Building critical consciousness
- Developing 'ordinary' people's leadership skills
- Personal engagement between people
- Spaces for training and learning
- Incremental base building
- Full participatory democracy

In the following sections, each of these elements will be considered in more detail.

## Action focus

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Involvement in various types of protest action played an important role for all the youth organisers interviewed. This has included helping to defend members of their peer group by organising 'large demonstrations along with other groups', helping 'to publicise the issue and bring it into the wider context of civil liberties. ... Hundreds of students marched across campus, with support and speeches from local MPs, lecturers and local activists. *Ceasefire* magazine ran articles on academic freedom and the use of the Terrorism Act and, in the end, the young men arrested were set free without being charged.' (*Ceasefire*) Not only did youth organising help to build popular resistance against the abuse of the Terrorism Act, it also opened a debate on civil liberties

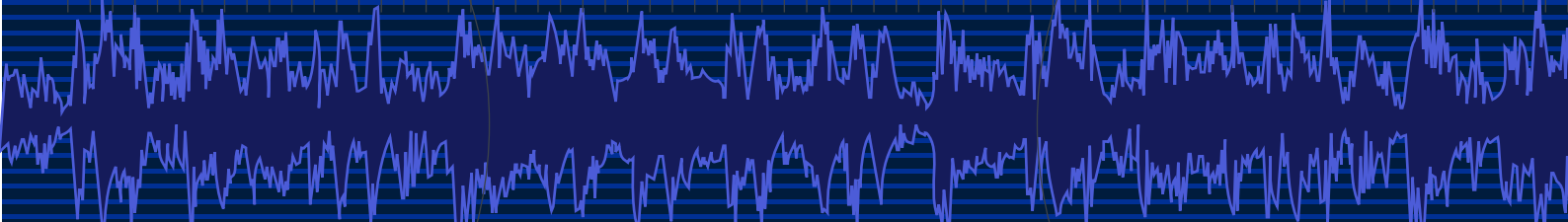
## YOUTH ORGANISING IN THE SOWETO UPRISING

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The 1976 Soweto uprising was a key moment in popular resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Although a combination of factors lay behind student activism in Soweto, the central issue was the second-rate education provided in the townships, known as 'Bantu education', and the use of Afrikaans as the teaching language. As part of their activism, students held daily meetings, which led to 'go slows' and other protests such as the dumping of Afrikaans textbooks outside the head teacher's door. Plans for a mass demonstration at Orlando West stadium in May 1976 had to be kept as secret as possible, to avoid police disruption, whilst allowing for the involvement of the largest number of students.

As one commentator wrote: 'Over a dozen assembly points had been chosen at various schools in Soweto. Each school had a set time of departure to Orlando West. In this way the student leaders hoped that each time the police received a report that one group of students was marching, before they could react another group would begin, and then another.'

In the event, the 15,000-strong peaceful demonstration was attacked by police with teargas and gunfire, and the students inevitably responded violently, in clashes that left hundreds dead. The successful co-ordinated planning and organising techniques that made the demonstration so strong spurred students to build links with trade unions, delivering leaflets calling for a general strike, strengthening student-worker solidarity. This led to three 'stay aways' in which nearly one million students and workers boycotted schools and jobs, rendering much of South Africa effectively ungovernable. It is this demonstration of mass people power that many claim reinvigorated the African National Congress. Organising which was initially a response to issues of education subsequently grew into popular resistance to the entire system of apartheid. Organisers in the US civil rights movement similarly worked to expand the scope of campaigns. For example, Ella Baker's 'More than a hamburger' speech explained how the system of segregation was wider than not having access to the food young African Americans wanted to enjoy.



by bringing the curbing of such liberties close to home for many young people.

In addition to self-organised actions, one of the main targets of one of the organisations is to maximise involvement in ‘as many of the relevant events/rallies/meetings/demos as possible’ (SH). This has involved international solidarity, as one organiser explained, ‘protesting war in the Middle East, such as the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008/9. We supported the student occupations in solidarity with the people of Palestine and offered support to students who were subject to disciplinary procedures as a result of their direct action.’ (BSC) The occupied spaces in the UK operated in different ways but many mirrored the consensual decision-making and participatory learning techniques of the Highlander School during the US civil rights movement.

These organisers did not plan these actions in their entirety: ‘Many Black students would not have felt confident enough to engage in direct action if they did not feel they had the legislative and legal support that our campaign offers, in addition to the large network of young activists across the UK that they can link up with.’ (BSC) The increased direct democratic participation resulting from the advice and involvement of organisations such as the BSC is likely to have had a significant impact on young people taking more power over their own lives.

## **Building critical consciousness**

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The primary methods of building critical consciousness are through discussion, media and art. The use of art and culture for political expression has a long history, as shown by the songs of the civil rights movement (‘We shall overcome’). For example, some of the groups interviewed explored the politics of hip hop to great effect, looking at its corporatisation and how its violent aspects reflect the violence of the culture from which it has

emerged (SOM). Hip hop is, of course, something that many young people are interested in, so, not only was this something the young people wanted to organise, it was also something which attracted many other young people not previously involved in political organising. It was based at a local community centre, free of charge, and showed a documentary about the issues of violence, discrimination and materialism in hip hop. Alongside local activists, some well-known hip hop artists took part in a discussion about hip hop, followed by performances from the artists and local hip hop acts. This provided opportunities for serious socio-political debate and for young people to express themselves through cultural expression.

The UK organisers interviewed also discussed conferences and other events in which talks and workshops were held ‘around themes and subjects’ such as the effects of hip hop culture on gender or race politics (SOM). As mentioned above, these were occasions to plan actions, assess the impact of past events and consider the likely impact of future events (SOM). It also ‘greatly increases the young people’s intellectual and organising confidence that they have an experienced support structure in place. For example, one initiative of thirty young people called “Team FTO” (Fight the Oppression) had no one supporting them in terms of ideas and discussion until they met Sons of Malcolm.’ (SOM) In another group, spaces were created where motions could be debated and passed, and tactics discussed. As such, more young people were able to find out what the organisation does and how they could become more involved in activities aimed at, for example, international solidarity or anti-fascism (BSC).

Some organisers worked to open up ‘space’ to discuss issues faced by a particular marginalised group that suffered discrimination in policing or stereotyping in the media (YMV). Spaces were created in which honest debate and discussion could take place and planning for future actions and campaigns could begin (YMV, SOM). Among such activities were awareness-raising



## THE ORGANISING PHILOSOPHY OF ELLA BAKER

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The civil rights movement in the US is most frequently associated with the 'big leaders' Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, or with individual actions, such as that of Rosa Parks. Often overlooked is the key role of young people in the movement and their leadership in challenging the racism of US society. In reality, young organisers transformed the civil rights movement; as one organiser remarked in 1961: 'when the students came along with their spontaneity, with their willingness to be heard and to strike back if necessary, I think it was a kind of turning point'. Young people were enthusiastic about protest and civil disobedience but, contrary to widespread perceptions, their political action was not a spontaneous outburst but the product of training and support by a network of organisers, such as Ella Baker, who developed their political knowledge and built their organising skills, empowering them to take action.

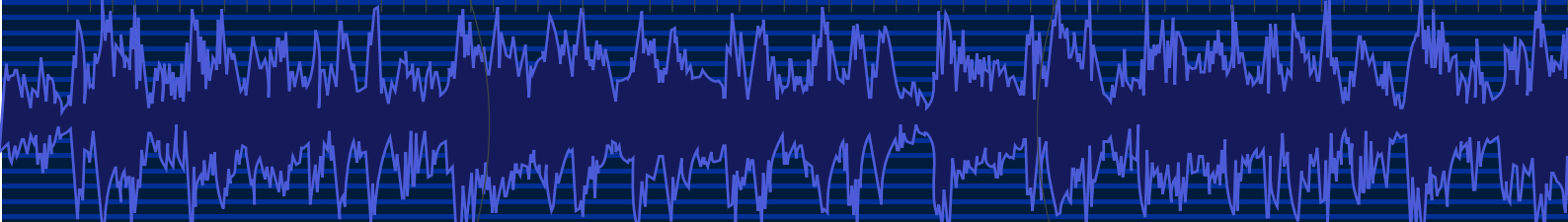
Ella Baker's organising began in 1928, after she moved from the South to New York; there she organised the Negro History Club, where African Americans could discuss their past in Africa and the Americas. She also co-edited the *Negro National News*, recognising the impact of media on political consciousness. After working on rights for African-American domestic workers, on an adult education centre and on food co-operatives during the Depression, Baker returned to the South to work for the NAACP, one of the largest institutions representing African Americans and the struggle for civil rights. Although the NAACP sought to challenge racial inequality in the US, Baker highlighted the prevalence of middle-class African Americans in the organization, arguing that top-down models of leadership needed to be avoided. As one commentator wrote: 'Ms Baker was sensitive to the way class antagonisms, real or imagined, could undermine everything. An important part of the organiser's job was to get the matron in the fur coat to identify with the winehead and the prostitute.'

Political organising was central to Ella Baker's career. One of the key organisations where she did this work was the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which trained famous activists like Rosa Parks, as well as influential organisations such as the SNCC. Highlander offered a space where young black and white activists could network and access resources, including tactical knowledge and training techniques – which developed into the SNCC – and, most importantly, to build relationships with each other and with key organisers and educators, such as Ella Baker. Young activists were either themselves living in communities where political organising was taking place or in communities that needed young organisers to help facilitate a permanent base for local people to engage in political activism. The lasting relationships that either already existed or were built over time allowed organisers such as Ella Baker to act on their philosophy that 'the oppressed, themselves, collectively, already have much of the knowledge needed to produce change'.

Ella Baker's approach to organising was based on the notion that all members of the movement could be leaders, regardless of experience or background. On becoming a national officer of the NAACP, she initiated her first training programme for local leaders to enhance skills and political consciousness. The programs covered: 'organisational development (holding onto members, mounting publicity campaigns) ... what to do about police brutality or employment discrimination ... The conferences then presented other local leaders who had successfully addressed the same kinds of dilemmas ... At the same time they tried to help local leaders find more effective ways to attack local problems ... the conferences also tried to help them see how local issues were, inevitably, expressions of broader social issues.'

After leaving the NAACP, Baker employed many of the same organising methods in her own activism, helping African-American and Hispanic parents work to desegregate schools, rather than having civil rights professionals do it on their behalf. By the mid-1950s, Ella Baker was dedicated to building strong local organisations made up of 'small groups of people maintaining effective working relationships among themselves but also maintaining contact in some form with other such cells, so that coordinated action would be possible'.





events which ‘challenge anti-Muslim racism and youth-on-youth violence’, for example the ‘Kick Islamophobia’ football tournament (YMV).

## **Developing ‘ordinary’ people’s leadership skills**

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Combating apathy is a key issue cited by UK organisers, who explain that ‘young people I work with don’t really “do” opinions, often saying “I don’t know”, waiting for you to feed them an answer they can agree with’ (SH). This echoes problems in encouraging opinion pieces and discussion online (*Ceasefire*) and in encouraging young people to take an active stand against discrimination, rather than trying to “keep their head down” and hope that, if they do, discrimination won’t affect them’ (BSC).

The methods currently being used to overcome apathy among young people start from the realisation that, when issues ‘directly affect them, or they feel someone in their immediate family or among their closest friends is facing injustice’, whether in the form of poverty or discrimination, they are often ‘quick to kick up a fuss’ (SH). Another example is a focus on ‘fighting racism in employment ... [and] fighting racism on campus’, which similarly has a direct impact on young people (BSC). Equally, a high level of critical consciousness has arisen in discussions on fees and cuts that affect many young people, particularly students (*Ceasefire*).

## **Personal engagement between people**

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The use of adult activists as speakers was highlighted by all of the UK organisers interviewed. However, it was thought not to ‘work as well when young people don’t see the link between cuts [or other issues] and their own lives’ (SH) or cannot see ‘further than their career prospects’ (BSC) – an individualism which is clearly linked to a market-driven consumer culture. This suggests that bridging the gap between activist speakers and the local context is the most important and difficult task for youth organisers.

In one striking example, an organiser described ‘listening to inspirational speakers. Usually in a residential setting. Often training will incorporate learning about international movements ... getting young people to think more broadly. Seeing how their lives are influenced by things happening all over the world.’ (SH) This step towards uniting young organisers and influential adult activists in a constructive and interactive environment brings the UK organisers closer to the models employed during the US civil rights movement. However, ‘there is no support to go beyond this, to guide or mentor young people so they are able to use these skills’ (SH), indicating that a sustainable relationship is as important as a participatory learning process.

## **Spaces for training and learning**

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The civil rights organisers in the US were able to put on conferences and workshops; the young people who organised the Soweto uprising had planning meetings within and across schools. The organisers interviewed also spoke of conferences (*Ceasefire*, BSC), to which adult speakers contributed and in which motions and actions were discussed.

The US civil rights organisers also had spaces such as the Highlander school, where organisers could network, learn and co-ordinate their work. Organisers in the UK based at youth centres enjoy similar advantages, as ‘there is something about the youth club that seems to attract people who do not go to school’ (SH). Groups in the UK which organise around local young people mentioned as a significant problem the ‘lack of warm, inside spaces to do activities and events’ (SOM). Organisations concentrating on particular political issues such as independent media or racism also complained of finding ‘access to suitable venues’ (BSC) or being forced to meet in ‘public spaces or at a friend’s home’ (*Ceasefire*).



## Full participatory democracy

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One way of building a long-term, empowering relationship between organisers and young people is through the kind of non-hierarchical educational methods developed by Paulo Freire. Freire believed that education is inherently political and emphasised that its liberatory potential for the oppressed rested on the extent to which learning environments were non-hierarchical: 'pedagogy must be formed *with*, not *for*, the oppressed'. Freire proposes a 'problem solving' or 'organic' approach to teaching, in which a problem is tackled and teachers and students 'become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow'.

Thus the activist speakers at youth centres or other spaces for young people would be directly exchanging ideas and experiences. This would better contextualise issues and inform possible solutions to be developed over time. Some organisers interviewed spoke of a 'mentoring role' that involves 'talking with [the young people], exploring their thinking and ideas ... On the basis of these conversations, we develop ideas for action.' (SOM) This 'organic' approach is consistent with a Freirian model and is similar to the methods employed by Ella Baker during the civil rights movement. As one participant in the Highlander school said of Baker: 'when we asked questions, she'd never give a direct answer, but ask questions ... then she'd be content to sit back and listen carefully as we wrestled with the issue, groping our way towards a shared understanding.'

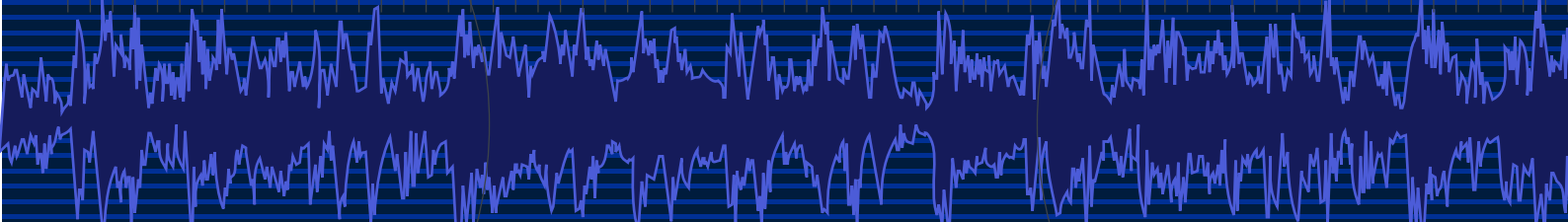
Organisers in the civil rights movement also describe 'perpetually asking questions over the life of the organisation – answers changed as the organisation grew and political conditions changed'. This method has been harnessed by popular education theorists who developed Participatory Action Research (PAR). They have observed that learning happens everywhere through action but that this learning must be questioned and debated. PAR uses the practitioner's direct actions

## THE STUDENT NON-VIOLENT CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE

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The SNCC – one of the key organisations of the US civil rights movement – had an approach to organising that was strongly influenced by Ella Baker. Policy decisions in meetings were made consensually: an issue had to be discussed and argued until everyone in the group agreed on a plan of action; questions were continually asked and positions re-assessed as the organisation grew and political contexts shifted.<sup>liv</sup> The SNCC regarded itself as a collective of 'mobile organisers' who went wherever they were invited to serve the struggle, adhering to SNCC principles of non-violent action, in order to 'empower the people to represent themselves and liberate the community'. This philosophy was designed to 'lend direction and continuity to this formless, spontaneous student uprising'. Workshops usually began by asking what young people wanted to learn and ended by asking what they planned to do when they got home; one of these workshops was attended by Rosa Parks, who promised to go back to Montgomery and work with the young people there.

SNCC became a leading organisation in the civil rights movement, organising 'freedom rides' aimed at desegregating the restaurants and waiting rooms in inter-state bus terminals. Many initially felt this approach was too dangerous and pointless. However, after seeing the effect the freedom rides had on other young activists, in addition to the reaction of the government and press, many more members of the SNCC joined the rides.



within a community or group to stimulate active learning and political activism, with a goal of improving not only the collective knowledge of the community but also the material, cultural and political demands of that community. Collective behaviour of this nature reproduces 'reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups'. To some extent, there is a tension between the PAR and Freirian models: Freirians would sacrifice the goal of building an organisation if forced to choose between this and helping people grow, because they 'think in the long run it's a bigger contribution'. In order for Free Radicals to remain genuinely youth-led, it is paramount that adult facilitators adhere to some combination of Freirian and PAR approaches. Providing young people with the tools to be active political agents cannot take place if some young organisers do not fully understand or appreciate the issues or actions followed by the rest of the group.

## Shaping the approach of Free Radicals

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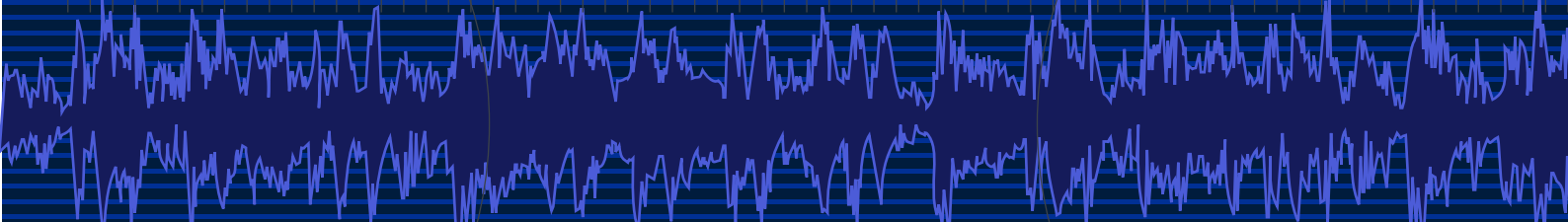
There are a number of barriers likely to make organising difficult for an organisation like Free Radicals. One of these is apathy among young people, as a number of organisations have commented (BSC, SH). However, some organisers have not seen apathy as an insurmountable problem, finding it can be overcome through engaging in informal discussion and questioning with young people and, in some cases, suggesting books and media that could further their understanding (SOM). UK organisations have also found that cultural and media events have been a good way of raising awareness, not only to further young people's understanding of particular issues but also to attract more young people to the group (SOM, YMV). To some extent, these approaches reflect the lessons of the civil rights movement and are consistent with a Freirian approach of non-hierarchical popular education.

Events such as conferences with adult activist speakers are also widely used to develop understanding of issues and encourage interaction between different young organisers (BSC, *Ceasefire*, SH). Nonetheless, Free Radicals must ensure that relationships between older activists and young people are equal exchanges. And we must move towards a structured version of the informal conversations in which adult facilitators ask questions to stimulate understanding (SOM). This would help to maintain long-term interest and sustainable relationships, which some organisers felt was currently missing (SH). It would also allow for a participatory method of learning, which popular education theorists assert will engender genuine interest and dedication. Importantly, interacting with older activists has helped many young organisers to see the historical and political context of their activism, which has been a key aim of many young organisers (SOM, BSC, *Ceasefire*, SH).

The current political and socio-economic context of the UK has shaped much of the current youth organising in the UK. The major issues which recurred in the interviews were:

- Policing, particularly in relation to counter-terrorism and the related stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists (*Ceasefire*, SOM, YMV);
- Cuts to public spending, particularly in relation to employment and education (BSC, SH);
- Discrimination relating to gender and ethnicity (*Ceasefire*, BSC, SOM, YMV);
- Foreign policy particularly in relation to the Middle East (SOM, BSC, *Ceasefire*).

It is difficult to ascertain exactly which, or how many of, these issues will be covered by any given participatory, youth-led organisation; however, these are at least some of the issues which must be addressed as part of any strategy for long-term political change.



Clearly there are activist groups in the UK working on these issues and some of these use organising methods that reflect some of the principles outlined above. Free Radicals should aim to build on the actions already being carried out by UK organisers while incorporating the political visions of the participants in their own group.

When young people have engaged in conversations, organising meetings or conferences on these issues, action has often followed. A lot of this action has involved trying to develop understanding and wider participation from within the community – for example, running film or music nights exploring issues such as hip hop culture (SOM). This type of organising has proved successful in showing young people that there are other people and resources that they can use to help further their political interests and activism (BSC, SOM, YMV); this kind of approach is likely to assist Free Radicals in maximising its reach in the local community.

A significant number of the UK organisers interviewed also engaged in protest and direct action. Some have organised their own protests (*Ceasefire*) whereas others have joined larger movements against war or cuts (BSC). Protest of various types will also be pursued by Free Radicals if the young people involved show interest in this type of political action.

During the civil rights movement, organisers constantly reflected upon and discussed previous meetings, actions and relevant events outside of the organisation, in order to ensure that organising and activism stayed up to date and continuously improved. This approach was formalised as PAR, in which collective behaviour reproduces ‘reliable knowledge upon which to construct power, or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and

exploited groups’. Regular, non-hierarchical meetings, in which young people and older activists can discuss previous meetings and actions, reflecting on what went well and how it can be improved, has thus proved imperative in past movements. Moreover, young people’s access to adult activists will help to generate an understanding of historical and political context, in order to avoid single-issue organising and promote links with other movements.

The popularity of cultural and media events indicates that these are likely to be the most effective means of engaging young people. Developing this engagement through events and conferences, in which debates and discussion with older activists and other young organisers takes place, is likely to help contextualise and develop a strategy for political organising. With support for popular protest rising – driven by cuts to public services that young people rely on and by opposition to imperialist foreign policy – opportunities are increasing for the direct democratic participation of young people in political movements. Employing a non-hierarchical participatory method of organising, with consensual decision-making and a long-term, equal learning relationship between all participants, has proved to be successful in the US civil rights movement and with popular education advocates elsewhere. These methods have also been employed by UK organisers in weekly meetings (SOM), in organising demonstrations (*Ceasefire*) and direct action (BSC). The best way to ensure that these factors are consistently accounted for and reviewed is to employ the PAR method, which has been used in the past with great success. By drawing on the strengths of current UK youth movements and reviewing the successes of youth organising across the globe, now and in the past, Free Radicals will be able to build the strongest possible methodology, to bring about effective youth-led political organising.





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**FreeRadicals** is a not-for-profit, non-partisan organisation established in May 2009 in response to alarming levels of political disempowerment among the young, poor and marginalised.

**FreeRadicals** aims to serve as a catalyst for grassroots organising and movement building, particularly focused on working with young people (aged 16–25) fighting for social and racial justice, equality and youth rights. The founding belief of FreeRadicals is that the answers to the problems facing society lie in the experiences of ordinary people. Those experiences are the key to grassroots power and potential for radical social change.