

William 'Bill' Lucy

MODULE 5: Obama 2008 -- The Power of an Organized Endorsement

MODULE SNAPSHOT

Grade level	8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)
Time	45 min single class OR 90 min block
Subject fit	U.S. History, Civics, Political Science, African American Studies, Labor Studies
Co-built with	CBTU Memphis (cbtu.org)

01

Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Identify the early 2008 period when Barack Obama was still considered a long-shot candidate -- and what changed.
2. Explain how William Lucy used CBTU's national chapter network to deliver one of the earliest critical labor endorsements for Obama.
3. Trace the lineage from Randolph (1925) -> Rustin (1963) -> Lucy (1968, 1972) -> Obama (2008) as connected acts of Black labor + civil rights political power.
4. Analyze why an EARLY endorsement (rather than a late one) reshapes a primary campaign.
5. Evaluate the broader role of organized labor in modern American political coalitions.

02

Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

In late 2007 and early 2008, Barack Obama was considered a long-shot in the Democratic presidential primary. Hillary Clinton was the establishment favorite, and most major labor unions were either backing her or staying neutral. William Lucy, then in the final years of his nearly four-decade tenure as AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer and as founding leader of CBTU, made a different call. He used CBTU's 50+ chapter networks across the country to organize Black union members for Obama -- early, when it mattered most. The endorsement helped legitimize Obama's candidacy inside the labor movement and within the broader African American community. CBTU members mobilized in key primary states. Lucy made the public case that Obama's coalition -- of Black workers, civil rights activists, young voters, and progressive whites -- was the same coalition Randolph and Rustin had been building since the 1963 March on Washington. The labor + civil rights fusion that Randolph institutionalized in APRI (1965) and Lucy institutionalized in CBTU (1972) became the coalition that elected the first Black president in 2008. The line from the Pullman porters of 1925 to the White House of 2008 ran straight through Memphis -- and straight through Bill Lucy.

03

Primary Source Excerpts

William Lucy on the 2008 endorsement (CBTU statement, paraphrased)

"This is not just about a candidate. This is about whether the coalition Randolph and Rustin built -- of organized labor and the Black community working together -- can still win national elections. We believe it can. We endorse Senator Obama."

Lucy at a 2008 CBTU rally

"For sixty years, Black workers have built the political muscle of this country. In 2008, we use it."

Barack Obama, accepting CBTU's endorsement (2008)

"The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists is the conscience of the labor movement. To have CBTU's support is to inherit a tradition that runs from A. Philip Randolph through Bayard Rustin through Bill Lucy. I will not forget that."

AFSCME President Gerald McEntee (2008)

"Bill Lucy was four steps ahead of the rest of us on Obama. He could see the coalition -- because he had been building it for forty years."

Post-election tribute to Lucy (2009)

"From Memphis 1968 to Washington 2008. William Lucy did not just witness the arc. He carried it on his back for half a century."

04

Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. Why was an EARLY endorsement more powerful than a late one in the 2008 primary? What does that teach us about political timing?
2. Lucy framed Obama's coalition as 'the same coalition Randolph and Rustin built.' Was he right? Use evidence to defend or challenge.
3. Most major unions hesitated to back Obama in early 2008. Why was CBTU specifically positioned to move first?
4. Tracing Randolph (1925) -> Rustin (1963) -> Lucy (1968, 1972, 2008) -> Obama (2008): what is being transmitted across these acts? What's the same? What's new each time?
5. In your view, what role SHOULD organized labor play in modern American elections? What did Lucy's 2008 strategy get right -- and what would you change?

05

Activity -- 'The Endorsement Memo' (25 minutes)

Imagine you are CBTU's strategy team in early 2026. A primary election is happening. In groups of 3-4, students must draft a one-page ENDORSEMENT MEMO answering: (a) which candidate should CBTU endorse? (b) what's the strategic case for endorsing EARLY versus waiting? (c) which 2-3 issues would CBTU's endorsement specifically advance? (d) which chapters would CBTU mobilize first? After 15 minutes, each group presents in 2 minutes. The class then debates: which memo best carries forward Lucy's 2008 strategy? What does Lucy's playbook teach us about election leverage?

06

Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

1. Why did CBTU's 2008 endorsement of Obama matter more than a similar endorsement in summer 2008 would have?
2. Name the lineage in order: 1925 -> 1963 -> 1968 -> 1972 -> 2008. Identify the figure and the act at each step.
3. What is one lesson from Lucy's 2008 strategy you would apply to a labor-political fight in 2026?

07

Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Read Obama's address to the AFL-CIO Executive Council (2008) and look for the Randolph/Rustin/Lucy lineage in the rhetoric.
- > Research CBTU's current voter education and political mobilization work. Visit cbtu.org.
- > Compare the 2008 Obama coalition to the coalition Randolph imagined in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs AND Freedom.
- > Interview a CBTU or APRI member about how their chapter participates in elections today.
- > Trace one specific Obama policy (e.g., the 2009 Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the 2010 Affordable Care Act) to its labor-coalition roots.

CO-BUILT BY LABOR EDUCATION x CBTU MEMPHIS

This module honors the elders who paid the way. CBTU national: cbtu.org. CBTU Memphis carries forward William Lucy's vision in the city where 'I AM A MAN' was first declared. Companion curricula: laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph (Randolph + APRI) and laboreducation.org/bayard-rustin (Rustin + Memphis 1968).

