

Rojava: An Anarcho-Syndicalist Perspective

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“The principal problem of national liberation struggle for the anti-statist anarcho-syndicalist form of organisation is that it is inherently statist. Advocating a more local form of state, the national liberation movement bows to the idea that the state is a desirable institution – just not in the current form. As such, it has the fundamental flaw that, if successful, it will generate a new state – which may or may not be ‘worse’ than the current oppressor, but it will nevertheless be an oppressive mechanism.” – Solidarity Federation

“Anarchists refuse to participate in national liberation fronts; they participate in class fronts which may or may not be involved in national liberation struggles. The struggle must spread to establish economic, political and social structures in the liberated territories, based on federalist and libertarian organisations.” — Alfredo Maria Bonanno

As this is published there come news reports that the Islamic State (ISIS) has been almost completely pushed out of the city of Kobane, party headquarters of Democratic Union Party (PYD) the Syrian affiliate party to the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), their co-president Saleh Muslim calling such developments the liberation of Kobane.¹ Hopefully as such progress in the region moves forward anarcho-syndicalists and social revolutionaries of all tendencies can start to objectively discuss the situation in West Kurdistan without the emotional reflex to a population under siege, facing a humanitarian disaster.

Anarcho-syndicalists should hold no illusions about the Rojava Revolution. Since the turn of the millenium there have been reports of a libertarian municipalist turn in the Kurdish national liberation struggle inspired by Murray Bookchin. This change in politics has been lead by jailed founder and ideological leader Abdullah Öcalan of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) who discovered Bookchin while in prison. The PKK a former Maoist/Stalinist organization had turned to ethnic nationalism after the fall of the Soviet Union and discreditation of “really existing socialism” and so such a turn has been welcomed by many on the revolutionary left. However such processes of political transformation do not automatically translate to full adoption within a populace never mind their official representation in leading parties.

After the start of the Syrian mass uprising and resultant civil war a power vacuum was created where the forces of Assad, tyrannical head of state in Syria, left Western Kurdistan, known as Rojava, to the Kurds. At first the Free Syrian Army (FSA) a so called moderate opposition force tied to Western Imperialism attacked the Kurdish forces but was soon repelled. In this open situation the PYD and it’s armed militias the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) decided

¹ “The air-strikes were very very successful. In a short time, we will report to the world liberation of Kobane.” -Saleh Muslim www.demokrathaber.net

to implement their now long held program of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism on the ground.

As reported by the Kurdish Anarchist Forum (KAF) a group of pacifistic Kurdish anarchists in exile, as the Arab Spring took hold of Syria there was the development of a directly democratic grassroots movement created by everyday workers and people in Rojava called the Movement of the Democratic Society (Tev-Dem). It was this movement that with pushed for the implementation of “its plans and programs without further delay before the situation became worse.”² This program was very extensive and it is worth quoting the KAF report at length:

“The Tev-Dem’s programme was very inclusive and covered every single issue in society. Many people from the rank and file and from different backgrounds, including Kurdish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Assyrian and Yazidis, have been involved. The first task was to establish a variety of groups, committees and communes on the streets in neighborhoods, villages, counties and small and big towns everywhere. The role of these groups was to become involved in all the issues facing society. Groups were set up to look at a number of issues including: women’s, economic, environmental, education and health and care issues, support and solidarity, centers for the family martyrs, trade and business, diplomatic relations with foreign countries and many more. There are even groups established to reconcile disputes among different people or factions to try to avoid these disputes going to court unless these groups are incapable of resolving them.

These groups usually have their own meeting every week to talk about the problems people face where they live. They have their own representative in the main group in the villages or towns called the ‘House of the People’.

They believed that the revolution must start from the bottom of society and not from the top. It must be a social, cultural and educational as well as political revolution. It must be against the state, power and authority. It must be people in the communities who have the final decision-making responsibilities. These are the four principles of the Movement of the Democracy Society (Tev-Dem).”

In other eras and places such a movement of democratic assemblies and committees at the base of society open to the people have been known collectively as workers’ councils. If these developments are true the Tev-Dem was quite the achievement.

However such reports have included accounts of the creation of a constituent assembly like parliamentary legislative body called the Democratic Self-Rule Administration. As New Compass a Bookchinite publishing collective has reported:

² The experiment of West Kurdistan (Syrian Kurdistan) has proved that people can make changes.
www.anarkismo.net

“While in many areas the Kurdish population already has decades of experience with the Kurdish movement’s concepts of women’s liberation and social freedom, here too there are of course also divergences. Some wish to organize in classical parties rather than in councils.

This problem has been solved in Rojava through a dual structure. On one hand a parliament is chosen, to which free elections under international supervision are to take place as soon as possible. This parliament forms a parallel structure to the councils; it forms a transitional government, in which all political and social groups are represented, while the council system forms a kind of parallel parliament. The structuring and rules of this collaboration are at the moment under discussion.”³

This among other questions lay bare the reality of the political situation in Rojava. It is unclear if the establishment of such a social democratic apparatus is a push by certain elements, or if this is part and parcel of Kurdish democratic confederalism. With anarchists the world over looking towards these developments as some libertarian light in the region, the question of the State and what form of governance is being established should continue to be watched closely. Historically the libertarian socialist program though has been for the development of genuine workers’ councils and committees like those originally set up by the Tev-Dem, and there have been bitter fights against the establishment of parliamentary democratic state projects, with free votes, where participation is atomized, and power really held by executive powers above the people.

If there is one great hope for libertarian openings in the region it is the existence of the women’s movements. Kurdish society like world society as a whole has historically been a deeply patriarchal society to the point that Öcalan from his own admission in 1992 is probably a rapist, with is especially worrying with the personality cult developed around him.⁴ Though still tied to his teachings Kurdish women out of their own experience through the last few decades started to organize themselves autonomously. Groups like the Kurdish Free Women’s Movement (KJB) and the Free Women’s Units Star (YJA Star) call for world wide solidarity between women’s movements against the patriarchal nation-state. As Dilar Dirik an activist close to YJA Star describes

³ Democratic Autonomy in Rojava new-compass.net

⁴ In a book written by Öcalan in 1992 titled *Cozumleme, Talimat ve Perspektifler* (Analyses, Orders and Perspectives), he stated: “These girls mentioned. I don’t know, I have relations with thousands of them. I don’t care how anyone understands it. If I’ve gotten close with some of them, how should this have been? (...) On these subjects, they leave aside all the real measurements and find someone and gossip, say ‘this was attempted to be done to me here’ or ‘this was done to me there’! These shameless women both want to give too much and then develop such things. Some of the people mentioned. Good grace! They say ‘we need it so, it would be very good’ and then this gossip is developed (...) I’m saying it openly again. This is the sort of warrior I am. I love girls a lot, I value them a lot. I love all of them. I try to turn every girl into a lover, in an unbelievable level, to the point of passion. I try to shape them from their physique to their soul, to their thoughts. I see it in myself to fulfill this task. I define myself openly. If you find me dangerous, don’t get close!”

in her talk on forming a “Stateless State” as seen in a widely circulated video, the Kurdish women’s movement through the experience of patriarchy in the Kurdish national liberation movement and Kurdish society at large has come to the conclusion that forming a new nation state should no longer be part of the Kurdish liberation project, as the nation state is an inherently patriarchal institution. However, though many anarchists would agree with this analysis and are surely nodding our heads in agreement, Dirik makes clear that the movement is not at the moment in favor of the general abolition of the State, but organizing democratic autonomy in spite of the State. As anarcho-syndicalists it is our duty and not a criticism to point out that the Syrian state, as well as the rest of the nation states encircling Rojava and which in the rest of Kurdistan exists will not merely disappear with the development of their project for regional democratic autonomy. The State must be actively fought and smashed, by the masses within every nation and it is the historical mission for all revolutionary internationalist liberatory forces.

In conclusion, the development of the social democratic representative democracy, the patriarchal and ethnic nationalist past of the PKK (PYD Saleh Muslim leader has hinted at needing a war to expel Arabs down the line⁵), the PYD’s cooperation with and truce with the FSA and Islamists⁶, the draft since July⁷, the different elements seeking US/international community support are reason enough to be hesitant to put too much emphasis on the official leadership. The bright spots where they exist are with the resistance and self-activity of the masses and the women’s movement. Social processes of transformation are complicated and often rife with internal conflicts and dynamics. The political program put forward might be decentralist with strong potentialities towards social democracy rather than anti-statist and social revolutionary. There is also still much research to be done about industrial and agricultural economy and organization. That shouldn’t hold anarcho-syndicalists back from defending the self defense of the everyday masses and their own organizations of struggle in Rojava against ISIS, local states and western imperialism, but we should be careful not to jump to cheerleading for the official representation of the Kurdish movement through its traditionally statist parties like PKK and PYD.

Long live the struggle of the toiling masses and free women!

With the oppressed against the oppressors, always!

⁵ PYD Leader Warns of War with Arab Settlers in Kurdish Areas rudaw.net

⁶ Details about the development of an alliance between the PYD and the FSA and Islamist forces including a split from Syrian Al Queda. now.mmedia.me
www.ozgur-gundem.com

⁷ Conscription begins in the Kurdish region of Syria, evasion elsewhere www.wri-irg.org

Appendices

A response by Hüseyin Civan

The effects of social revolutions are not limited by the effect of struggle against political and economical powers in the geographical region where the revolution happens. It's important to see their effect on other different regions along with the intellectual and practical changes this effect brings. Being talked about with Kobanê Resistance, Rojava Revolution gets more important now to see this effect more clearly.

The reaction and attack of the state and capitalism against what's happening in Rojava, is expected at this point. However, we need to turn our face to the internal debates in social opposition at the same time. It's necessary to emphasize that such debates are an important resort for understanding what the effect of Rojava is.

Since the start of this process, anarchist comrades' behaviors towards understanding Rojava and taking up with the resistance has been quite important for remembering the international solidarity, which we aren't familiar to see in such an organized manner. Again we have experienced that solidarity is our greatest weapon.

This manner of solidarity that was created between anarchists inevitably made the resistance in Kobanê a headline especially among anarchists all around the world.

The paper "Rojava: An anarcho-syndicalist point of view" which was published on several different sites is one of the reflections of this headline. This evaluation of the paper especially aims to correct information about Rojava Revolution and Kobanê Resistance, instead of pointing out positive and negative sides of the paper and making a simple criticism.

Considering different comments may form with the different perspectives of anarchist organizations in different geographical regions; I focused the criticism of paper on the matter of incomplete evaluation of Kurdish freedom struggle and Rojava Revolution. Political criticism against a community which is in a life or death struggle under war conditions can't be made ignoring this condition. Even so if said criticism has certain prejudices and was formed with sharp generalization. And of course, if a huge people's movement is evaluated with a degrading manner...

First of all it's necessary to state that forming a solidarity relationship with Rojava Revolution and Kobanê Resistance is not an emotional relation, unlike comrades with an "anarcho-syndicalist perspective" emphasize. Because anarchist organizations

don't base their solidarity relationships on "sympathy". These relationships mostly form considering a political perspective and strategies planned to realize this perspective. Thereby, solidarity and taking up with a struggle aren't far from objectivity.

In different parts of the paper, PKK criticism is tried to be based on party's political history — and with criticism such as short-coming implementation of "libertarian municipality", incomplete state of political transformation and having nationalistic roots; current condition and perspective of Kurdish Movement is being left under prejudice. While doing all these, prejudice is being based on incomplete information, consciously or unconsciously. No one claims Kurdish Freedom Movement is an anarchist movement. Thereby, the practices which are claimed to be short-coming or flawed should be evaluated considering this fact. On the other hand, a people's movement that value "criticism of the state and the capitalism" so much can't be overlooked by anarchists. This matter can't only be tied to Bookchinist "libertarian municipalism". Movement has referenced many different comrades from Bakunin to Kropotkin on its theoretical relations with anarchism, and could interpret the state problem with a wide perspective. On the other hand, realizing this idea led to a practice which is quite libertarian and non-central. I think this part is very important. This information is based not on quotations from articles and books, but on mutual observation of political organizations that share common ground for struggle.

The condition of Rojava is not as such because of Assad leaving the region or his claimed agreements with global powers. Great social transformation that happened in Rojava two and a half years ago, happened in a conjuncture where political activity forced Middle-East to choose governance of one of two opposing sides (coup-supporting seculars — conservative democrats). Rojava, when "springs" turned into winter in Middle-East region, is people not fitting into these two sides and creating their own solution.

While life is being re-built in Rojava, the non-central structure of social mechanisms being created, insistent emphasis on statelessness, organization of the production-consumption-distribution relations in a way as far from capitalism as possible, self-organization being the warrantor of social process, communes in three different cantons shaping the operation of communes with independent decision processes are undeniably important in this age. Especially, how could an anarchist deny the fact that this process is a promising experience for multiplying with similar examples in different geographical regions?

Let's repeat for comrades that insist on not comprehending. This is not an effort to claim it is an anarchist process. However, the anarchist characteristics of the process in Rojava would make anarchists who struggle for a social revolution happy. This happiness is far from the romanticism that's criticized in the paper, it's about understanding that our political goals and strategies are applicable in such a system, in such an age.

No one can claim that practices of stateless people are negative for anarchists who struggle for a social revolution. Such practices in different geographical regions may develop under their genuine conditions. Claiming these genuine struggles are not adequate

with anarchist principles and reducing their importance is exhibiting an understanding of anarchism that rely on theoretical arrogance lacking practice. Another thing in the paper that's worth pointing at is the authenticity of references. It's interesting to reference the expressions of an online group just because they have Kurdistan and anarchist in their name. It's not about the expressions of comrades being right or wrong. It's a problematic question that what political fact the group bases their expressions on, not showing any political activity in Kurdistan region while theoretically criticizing the Kurdish Freedom Movement on a practical level.

While the women's movement in Kurdistan is directly related with the freedom movement, comments that claim the women's movement is apart from this integrity or even against it, are twisting of information. It's a logical flaw to criticize movement as patriarchic while emphasizing on the importance of women's movement in the struggle. Moreover, the logical flaw continues when the claim of Ocalan being a rapist is confirmed through quotes from state's anti-propaganda websites. Another example of references is about "Kurds wanting war to expel Arabs". When you cherry pick a speech disregarding its context, you can use it to support any context of your own. It's clear that the topic of the referred news is about settlers moved by Assad to change the demographic structure of region towards his assimilative goals. Just like Israeli settlers.

Causes can be invented when one tries to be over suspicious. However, it's important to question the relation of these causes with actual facts. It's a mistake to try to define Kurdish Freedom Movement as a nationalist movement. This definition and the likes overlook the transformation of the movement and claim that it continues its old political structure. A perspective that has no knowledge of the practices of process, and has only criticizing articles as a source of information, is extremely problematic. Because a massive part of these critics are worded by statist mindset and its extensions. A healthy criticism can be made by observing and experiencing the political practices. Every criticism that lacks a vision of geographical region and practicality, carry the danger of falling into orientalism.

We spoke before about the process in Rojava and the movement not being anarchist. Another lacking thing is evaluation of Kurdish people's freedom struggle apart from the historical fact that they have been struggling for centuries in Mesopotamian region. Those who draw away from the truth for ideological correctness and devaluate people's centuries long struggle, are betraying their revolutionary responsibilities and should pay attention to whose front they are placing themselves at.

To perceive the classes in a shallow vision and trying to interpret social struggles just with economical struggles is to create a hierarchy between the struggles of the oppressed. An anarchist point of view that limits the oppressed to workers and disregards other relations of power contradicts the history of anarchist movement. Revolutionary

history of anarchism is full of economical, political and social struggles of the oppressed. To overlook the effect of movement on people's freedom movements from Europe to Far East Asia in different centuries, to exclude the practical feeding of this effect to class struggles in South America, is to ignore the integrated structure of anarchist movement.

We are not fortunetellers, we can't possibly know what will happen in Rojava a month or a year from now. We can't know that this social transformation which not only gives us hope as revolutionaries that struggle in a geographically close region, but also feeds our struggle in the regions that we struggle in, would move towards a positive or negative future. But we are revolutionary anarchists. We can't just sit aside, watch what's happening and comment; we take part in social struggles and take action for an anarchist revolution.

Long live the Rojava Revolution!

Long live the Kobanê Resistance!

Long live the Revolutionary Anarchism!

Hüseyin Civan (from DAF)

Reply to Anarkismo & DAF on Rojava by K.B.

To call my critique of the PKK an attack on the Rojava Revolution is misleading. My article tried to emphasize support for what I saw as "organizing from below" by the Tev Dem and the women's factions of the PKK. I appreciate the Anarkismo editorial group and the DAF replies to my perspectives shared on Rojava from my "anarcho-syndicalist" view, for the spirit they wish to hold debate on developments there.

Like the Anarkismo editorial group I believe in sharing honest critique but not liquidation of anarchist political positions. My article did not say we can only show support if an organization is adequately anarchist or internationalist enough, like some purists do. While Anarkismo and DAF comrades say "No one claims Kurdish Freedom Movement is an anarchist movement" many Western anarchists have not been so clear, comparing the entire situation to being a second coming of Spain 1936, just because Bookchin used to be a green anarchist who rejected class struggle for libertarian municipalism. I think recognizing this shows that we are sensible about developments on the ground compared to the uncritical cheerleading of anarcho-liberals and other leftist activists.

First I would like to make some things clear. I support nationally oppressed people's fight against national oppression. What I do not support is national liberation movements, fronts, parties but the historically existing class fronts within such struggles that anarchists have supported, like workers and popular resistance in their organizations from below. Based on the reports from the KAF of the "directly democratic" Tev Dem and awareness campaign of the "anti-statist" Kurdish women's organizations

(that are autonomous relatively within the rest of the PKK) I saw these manifestations as worthy of highlighting as a hope for the region:

“If these developments are true the Tev-Dem was quite the achievement.”

“As Dilar Dirik an activist close to YJA Star describes in her talk on forming a “Stateless State” as seen in a widely circulated video, the Kurdish women’s movement through the experience of patriarchy in the Kurdish national liberation movement and Kurdish society at large has come to the conclusion that forming a new nation state should no longer be part of the Kurdish liberation project, as the nation state is an inherently patriarchal institution.”

I made clear that it is not critique but our duty as anarcho-syndicalists to not liquidate our politics along with our solidarity and share our perspectives in whatever ways we can. I chose to highlight these organizations like the Tev-Dem and women’s groups/militias as real manifestations on the ground that seemed to be formed on a class basis as well as being non-statist and anti-patriarchal as compared to the mainstream of the PKK.

In regards the PKK and it’s mainstream I would like to clear up a few things as put forward by my critics. I will admit humbly that I did not do enough research into the allegations of assault, and a comrade from Turkey pointed out to me that if these admissions are from Öcalan and not just anti-Kurdish propaganda they are in regards intra-party romantic relationships that were banned in the party’s Marxist-Leninist phase. However I maintain if this is Öcalan speaking he still comes off with loads of machismo in regards his relations with women, and it is not disconnected from reality to point out that the PKK was historically a very patriarchal organization, otherwise why are there autonomously organizing women’s factions within it?

“We agree with “K.B.” that it is precisely in the self-activity of the grassroots masses and women of the PKK and allied structures that the most promising prospects for struggle in the direction of complete liberation lie.”
— Anarkismo editorial group

If this is what the Anarkismo editorial group believes then I hardly see why they should try to say I support some abstract pure groupings that don’t exist. My article highlighted what I saw as the grassroots masses (Tev-Dem) and the autonomous women’s structures within the PKK. What I do reject from an anarcho-syndicalist standpoint is the leftover nationalism of hierarchical political parties, especially when there is the chance for grassroots popular and anti-national anti-patriarchal resistance from below in such national struggles. I believe as anarchists there are class lines we do not cross, and critical support for nationalist parties is crossing them.

“To perceive the classes in a shallow vision and trying to interpret social struggles just with economical struggles is to create a hierarchy between the struggles of the oppressed. An anarchist point of view that limits the oppressed to workers and disregards other relations of power contradicts the history of anarchist movement. Revolutionary history of anarchism is full of economical, political and social struggles of the oppressed.” -Hüseyin Civan, DAF

I think this is a great point put forward by our DAF comrade. I disagree with them on my article seeing the Rojava situation only through the lines of the economic. I mostly made a political analysis, since reports are few on the economic makeup and class composition of society there. I did however think that the Tev Dem seemed more connected at least in origin to a real movement of daily working/popular class life (though now there are reports that Tev-Dem has been transformed more into local municipal government of the social democratic administration.) I also saw the social and cultural situation of Kurdish women leading them to favorable non-statist positions. This reminder is an important one to take heed of in the light of left-wing Marxists who tend to bend the stick too far in favor of class reductionist approaches. However it is very much apparent that the nationalist and social democratic program as it is developing is in no way favorable to libertarian communist outcomes, its economic program being cooperativist and seeking a space to integrate relatively autonomously within capitalism, instead of smashing it.

Going forward I hope comrades from Anarkismo and DAF can see my writings as informed by this reply, and can refrain from strawman arguments and friendly fire assertions that my perspective was an “ultra-left” position statement on these issues.

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With the oppressed against the oppressors, always!

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Karl Blythe

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<libcom.org/article/response-article-rojava-anarcho-syndicalist-perspective>

DAF stands for Devrimci Anarşist Faaliyet (Revolutionary Anarchist Action), an
anarchist group in Turkey.

www.thetedkarchive.com