

# **The grim reality of the Rojava Revolution**

**from an anarchist eyewitness**

Anti War, anonymous

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## Police in Rojava

In 2014, when David Graeber and others began claiming that a genuine anti-capitalist revolution was occurring in Syrian Kurdistan, the healthy reaction was scepticism. After all, the initiators of this revolution, the PKK, had a long history of Stalinist politics and brutal repression.<sup>1</sup>

Today the evidence is building up that, unfortunately, the sceptics were right. For example this article — apparently by an anarchist living in Rojava — claims both that the PKK ‘seized power’ and that most of the people in the Rojavan government are from outside Syria.<sup>2</sup>

The anonymous author also says that Rojavans have little interest in either anti-capitalism or cooperatives and instead just say: ‘tell us what to do and pay us a salary.’<sup>3</sup> Their plea for activists to go out to Rojava not just to help rebuild society but to, somehow, rescue the revolution is simply depressing.

But we should not get depressed. There still must be some genuine class and gender struggles going on in Rojava. And, of course, this whole situation merely confirms what we’ve known for a very long time: you cannot build socialism in one country.

How we might build a movement that can overthrow capitalism in a world revolution, is another question. But such a movement will, evidently, not be initiated by the PKK.<sup>4</sup>

Quote:

THE TIME OF THEORY IS OVER. NOW IS THE TIME OF ACTION

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<sup>1</sup> It has been claimed that the PKK executed 1,500 of its own members.<sup>†(1)</sup> This may be an exaggeration but one former member insists that Abdullah Ocalan ‘demanded absolute submission to his person from the people in his surrounding and unrelentingly pushed this through.’<sup>(2)</sup> Another has said that ‘you’re not allowed to question Ocalan’s orders. You’re not free. ... If there was Kurdish state it would be like the PKK.’<sup>(3)</sup> Yet another PKK dissident has said: ‘One man decides everything, nobody else can say what they think. ... To become a member of the PKK is like joining a religion.’<sup>(4)</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This claim is backed up by Abdullah Ocalan’s brother, Osman, who says that the PKK still has a Stalinist ideology of ‘one party, one leader’ and that the PKK ‘orchestrates 90% of what is happening in Syrian Kurdistan.’<sup>(5)</sup> The Rojava regime, apparently, has even tried to ban the display of pictures of politicians other than those from the PKK such as Abdullah Ocalan.<sup>†(6)</sup> They have also banned overly critical journalists.<sup>†(7)</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Workers’ ‘uncooperative’ attitude is hardly surprising considering that selling your labour to a cooperative in a market economy gives you no real control of your life anyway.

This refusal of workers to cooperate with the regime may also explain why one of Rojava’s finance ministers has recently declared that ‘all workers must work in the communal projects’.<sup>(8)</sup> As well as this apparent advocacy of forced labour, the minister also said that private property is ‘sacred’ and that ‘the market is a main part of social economy.’

<sup>4</sup> The PKK leadership gave little support to the Taksim Square uprising during the Arab Spring.<sup>†(9)</sup> In his recent book, despite his sympathies for Ocalan, Paul White suggests that PKK leader may also try to oppose the spread of any revolution from Syria to Turkey. Paul White, *The PKK, Coming Down from the Mountains* p157.<sup>(10)</sup>

(1) ob.nubati.net

(2) libcom.org

(3) ejts.revues.org

(4) www.chris-kutschera.com

(5) rudaw.net

(6) www.kurdwatch.org

(7) rudaw.net

(8) kurdishquestion.com

(9) iwallerstein.com

(10) www.amazon.com

I've been in Rojava since half a year working in various areas of society which has given me the unique opportunity to get a good overview of the system in action. My libertarian philosophy and practical experience puts me very close to the revolutionaries of Rojava and they like to hear my ideas or criticism.

I'm writing this article after seeing the article titled: 'We should not let Kobane and the rest of Rojava to be defeated by the big corporations and the international financial institutions.'<sup>(11)</sup>

To which my response is: then what are you doing in the West? Rojava is better than the West. When you stay in the West, you are helping capitalism. You are part of the machine. If you live in the city, consume products or participate in life there, you are a hypocrite.

There are not enough people here of radical disposition. We need people here who can work. Once you are here, it is not stressful. It's a fertile space and people are listening to you and your ideas. In Europe or America, projects for autonomy are blocked, but here the government listens to you and provides the resources they can. But things can go slow.

The revolution is not certain and Rojava needs the strong spirit of foreign revolutionaries giving their support here on the ground. It's not enough to make some token gesture. If you are a revolutionary, then enough with your joke excuses, you have work to do.

Rojava happened because experienced revolutionaries came from Bakur (the PKK in Kurdish Turkey), organised their own underground military force and then seized power when the Syrian civil war started. Most of the people in the government are from Bakur. They formerly spent years in the mountains organising and studying philosophy. They know about freedom and politics, and are not stupid.

These are revolutionary people with a deep mind trying to organise a society that only has a mindset of submission and respect for authority. In Rojava, normal people don't care about politics (like in Europe). They really don't care. They just want nice clothes, clean streets and good schools. They just want to go to work and have their life sorted out for them without extra effort. If they like Ocalan, it's because he helps them.

Some Kurds in Rojava don't understand why they are helping Arabs. Some people like Barzani (from Iraqi Kurdistan) despite him being a crony capitalist of the West and a corrupt racist dictator. They see him as helping his own people because all the corporations are coming to Bashur. They say that Erbil is clean, that there are nice buildings and good shops. Very bourgeois things. But this is what normal people in this society desire.

For instance, one difficulty in Rojava is that the economic groups are trying to organise worker cooperatives that serve the needs of people's lives. However people are often saying just tell us what to do and pay us a salary. They just want to work and be given a salary. They don't want to take charge of their lives, manage a business

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<sup>(11)</sup> libcom.org

or think about anything. They just want to be organised and serve their role. This is the old system of Bashar Al Assad and the oppressed mentality it has created in many people here.

However there is a lot of support for Rojava and Ocalan, even if normal people have no idea what they're talking about, many people are behind 'their leaders'. Not everything is perfect and problems exist. It's tough to get people thinking for themselves. This revolution's main aim is a cultural transformation.

Rojava is organising grand projects in education and their task is momentous. However parents simply want respectable looking schools where the children are well behaved. People talk with nostalgia about the old Assad schools which were well equipped and looked good. [/b

[b]On women's participation, there are some very strong women in important roles in the society. The relations between men and women are unique and special, something I haven't seen even in Western society. However normal girls are still very much sticking to their old gender roles, being obsessed with makeup and clothes. I went to a cooperative meeting, half the members women, half men and yet for three hours only men were talking. The women only sat and didn't participate.<sup>5</sup> They have a lot to do here to overturn an antiquated culture, but there are real things happening here. There is some very good work with women here.

It's all well and good when outsiders from Rojava are saying there shouldn't be corporations, but the fact is that people have their needs to live. It is the responsibility of the system of Rojava to provide for its people. If the administration cannot provide the needs of the people or a decent life, then people will turn against them regardless of ideology. So they are under pressure. Here are some adverts in Rojava:

'Summer production usually exceeds the needs of this region. To benefit from the overabundance of food, we need to reactivate a factory for canned food which has not been working for a long period.'

'We are looking for \$60,000 for the repair and maintenance of a fodder factory. The central of economic development considers it necessary in order to provide sheep farmers with fodder.'

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<sup>5</sup> This observation is consistent with Paul White's claim that 'there is no indication that [the PKK's feminism] has affected traditional societal values – especially in the rural areas that comprise most of Kurdistan, which largely continue to be bound by customary Islamic standards regarding women's role.' He also says that 'most women in conservative Kurdish society value their traditional role.' (White p149)

This conservative attitude is not surprising considering that the PKK have some way to go in terms of promoting a wider social and sexual liberation. For example PKK fighters still seem to be 'forbidden'<sup>(12)</sup> from having sexual relationships. As Ocalan said, female fighters should maintain 'the refusal of any other love than that of the homeland.' (White, p136.)

Unfortunately, the PKK's feminists go along with this fervent nationalism by, for instance, saying that the first principle of the 'Women's Liberation Ideology [is] Patriotism: Our leader Apo [Ocalan] says "Before everything women's ideology cannot exist without land. ... This means that the first principle of the women's ideology is a woman's connection to the land it is born on; in other words, patriotism."<sup>(13)</sup>

<sup>(12)</sup> [ejts.revues.org](http://ejts.revues.org)

<sup>(13)</sup> [www.pkkonline.com](http://www.pkkonline.com)

‘Project of modern spaghetti factory for production of different shapes and sizes from 200g to 1kg with a capacity more than 7–10 tons per day. Estimated cost around \$2 million, with 25 workers.’

‘Al Jazeera has significant livestock characterised by good quality pasture. In order to take advantage of this opportunity, a dairy factory is needed to produce sterilised milk in glass or plastic bottles.’

So where are all the skilled people? We don’t need your show of solidarity or outside help. We need people here on the ground. We need people that can teach, start and manage projects and provide real solutions. You cannot do anything from outside that is actually effectual.

The people in power here say many things like that there’s no state, there’s people power ... but the fact is if this were a real democracy, normal people would immediately recreate a normal state system because they see Barzani. The YPG is an army, the Asayish is a police force and despite what people say, there is a central government, central economics group and central ministries of health, education ... and a growing bureaucracy. Now Rojava is sending diplomats to Western countries asking for help and 70% of their money goes to the army.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, in positions of power, there are many revolutionary people with a strong anti-state philosophy.<sup>7</sup> So there is an opportunity here. We have a unique space where we can organise, carve out our own projects and implement our ideas. We are at an advantage in this space with access to a lot of resources (think oil fields and country of three million people) rather than your little commune or squat.

Maybe that’s cool for you and you like the lifestyle but don’t call yourself a revolutionary. I’m disappointed that there’s less than a dozen libertarian type revolutionaries here. They are desperate for solutions here and if we don’t give them, they will go to the corporations rather than allowing their people to starve.

ISIS became strong when they announced to the world their project for a revolutionary caliphate. Revolutionary Muslims came from all over the world with the strength of their conviction and made ISIS powerful. If Rojava fails it will be because of the lack of international solidarity and I will personally disown the anarchist movement

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<sup>6</sup> The extent to which the Rojava regime relies on its alliance with US imperialism is shown in this map. Even though the US has allowed its main ally in region, Turkey, to bomb the PKK, the Rojavan authorities are still begging for more US support. As the commander of the Rojavan militia says:

‘We have been collaborating with the United States in the war against terror with great success. ... We hope to expand on this anti-Jihadi terrorist collaboration and establish even closer relationships. ... We wish to have a stronger alliance with the United States.’<sup>(14)</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This claim that the Rojava regime has a ‘strong anti-state philosophy’ is rather contradicted by numerous statements by Ocalan himself. For example, he says: ‘It is not true, in my opinion, that the state needs to be broken up and replaced by something else... [It is] illusionary to reach for democracy by crushing the state.’<sup>(15)</sup>

The picture at the top of the page of Rojavan police in front of a ubiquitous portrait of Abdullah Ocalan indicates that the state in Rojava is far from crushed. (Click [HERE](#)<sup>(16)</sup> for a video of the Rojavan police.)

<sup>(14)</sup> [www.kurdishquestion.com](http://www.kurdishquestion.com)

<sup>(15)</sup> [new-compass.net](http://new-compass.net)

<sup>(16)</sup> [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

as a joke movement incapable of practical change. Now the revolution has happened but people don't seem to want to know about it. Cool.

Here are some excuses I've heard from friends I've invited:

'I have to look after my dog.'

'I can do more from here advocating and protesting.'

'I don't know if Rojava is real' (i.e. I will stay comfy in a capitalist state rather than risk a revolution).

'I have important work here' (maybe your work is more useful in Rojava).

History is made by people that leap into unknowns. If you are satisfied with the status quo, stay where you are. But this revolution is the biggest libertarian project of this century. This is a chance to be a better person that swum against the tide. The more of us that do this, the stronger we become. And we don't even need to be that great in number.

The time of theory is over. Now is the time of action.

— from Rojava Reality<sup>(17)</sup>

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<sup>(17)</sup> [amargipl.wordpress.com](http://amargipl.wordpress.com)

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skeptical of the revolution in Rojava or the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

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