

Internationalists in the Revolution

Internationalist Commune

Summer 2018

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Despite being under attack from the Turkish state and its allied militias operating under the banner of the Free Syrian Army on the one hand, and the Islamic State (ISIS) on the other, behind the front lines of the Syrian civil war the revolution in Rojava continues to develop in exciting ways. Inspired and shaped by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan and the struggle of the Kurdish freedom movement, Rojava is a revolutionary project with the aim of challenging capitalist modernity through women's liberation, ecology and radical democracy.

For several years, internationalists from all over the world have travelled to Rojava to contribute to and participate in the revolutionary project. Foreign fighters who have joined the armed struggle have garnered significant attention in the international media, but much less is known about the foreigners working *behind* the front lines. Inspired by the revolutionary perspective of the Kurdish freedom movement, they have come to learn and to support and help develop existing projects. Their aim is to organize a new generation of internationalists to challenge capitalist modernity.

Supported by the youth movement in Rojava (YCR/YJC), some of these activists established the Internationalist Commune of Rojava in early 2017. ROAR editor Jooris Leverink spoke with two members of the Internationalist Commune about their motivations for joining the revolution, the different projects they have been involved in and the importance of solidarity beyond borders.

What were your motivations for going to Rojava, and how did you end up there?

Casper: I was involved in social and ecological movements in Europe, but with time I saw the problems and shortcomings of this way of doing politics. In fact, that concept was an obstacle to my political understanding in itself “did politics”, but I did not ask how to live and fight in a revolutionary way. And when I asked myself this question, I could not find an answer. Thanks to the resistance against ISIS in Kobane, I got to know the Kurdish movement and I saw that the revolution here lays out a path towards overcoming the critical problems this world faces — in social, political, economic and ecological aspects. To begin to follow that path, I came to Rojava and joined the revolution.

Clara: I think that each one of us should be able to feel and be revolted by any injustice in any place in the world. In fact, I was upset by the hypocrisy of our governments, our officials, our newspapers — and even other leftists — who spoke about ISIS, the Syrian people and the Kurds without taking real or concrete action. Only a few of them ever thought of coming here, which is the most important way to challenge these injustices and ensure our actions follow our words.

Casper: To be here is my expression of internationalism — overcoming the borders of states that are implemented between people. I often asked myself: “what would I have done against fascism in the times of the Spanish Civil War?” And many times, I answered: “of course I would have joined the resistance.” Today the fascist power is Turkey, and like in the times of the Spanish War, we as internationalists have to fulfil our duty.

Tell us a bit more about the Internationalist Commune: How was it set up? How many of you are there? What kind of projects have you initiated or been involved with?

Clara: The Internationalist Commune was jointly created by some internationalists who decided to engage in long-term work here, and comrades from the youth movement in Rojava (YCR/YCJ). The Commune aims to bring internationalism to life again, but also to find a new way within internationalism itself. As such, the commune is a structure that helps internationalists to find their place in the revolution. We support the struggle here, learn from the revolution, and do so in an organized way. For example, we share our experiences as internationalists, and help to organize solidarity structures around the world.

Casper: Part of the Commune is the newly constructed Internationalist Academy, where we have space to live, work and study together until people move on to work with different structures in the civil society of Rojava. It's important that internationalists who arrive in Kurdistan have the chance to learn about the philosophy the Kurdish freedom movement stands on – and also to study the language.

Clara: One of our main projects is the campaign “Make Rojava Green Again.” The aim is to contribute to the ecological work of the revolution. But of course, the ecological situation cannot be analyzed without considering the state politics of Syria, Turkey and others.

To take one example, the availability of water is a major issue. Besides general aspects of global climate change that heavily affect Rojava, the Turkish state uses water as a political weapon. Most of the rivers in Rojava have their source in the mountains of Bakur, the Kurdish areas within the formal Turkish state that are currently occupied by the Turkish army. Using mega-dams, the Turkish state controls the water supply and literally turns off the tap on the people here.

The Turkish state is also drilling deep wells along the border line to Rojava and using a lot of ground water for agriculture. The level of groundwater in Rojava is constantly decreasing as a result. This has an impact on water security and availability and impacts both nature and society. A severe lack of water means much wheat is lost or burned and Rojava has to import grain from abroad – if the states that impose the embargo on Rojava let it through.

Casper: As the campaign, we have collected a lot of information about the ecological situation in a brochure, which will be published within the next month. But we are also contributing on a practical level to find solutions for the situation. At the beginning of the year we started developing a tree nursery at the Internationalist Academy. From this beginning, we will help reforesting a nature reserve not far from us at the Sefan Lake. But we will need more than the trees we can grow in our nursery, and therefore we are also collecting international support for the ecological work here in Rojava.

What does internationalism mean to you?

Casper: From a really basic perspective, internationalism is exactly what Clara said: “to feel and be revolted by any injustice in any place in the world.” To see the connection between struggles, to see how they are related to each other, to see the necessity of learning from each other. To feel a connection to people who are struggling, to feel the beauty of the fight and the sadness of the losses societies have suffered in the struggle for freedom.

It's important to understand that the dynamics of struggles depend on each other. Sometimes that's not really visible, but changes in the Middle East have a strong impact on politics in European states and elsewhere. We can easily see what kind of dynamic evolved, for example, in Europe alongside the resistance in Kobane or Afrin. Many people questioned the politics of the EU states and saw the relationship between weapons production in their own countries and the attack against the revolution, with the same weapons. We have to ensure that our different struggles are strengthening one another at the same time as we engage in local fights.

Clara: Internationalism is to feel the duty of all revolutionaries to fight shoulder by shoulder — it doesn't matter where. On a theoretical level, we have to see that we cannot understand the reality of the world today if we do not share our different perspectives and realities. And that's only possible if we struggle together. The new aspect we see in the internationalism of the Kurdish freedom movement is that they are proposing a common frame in which all revolutionaries and radical democratic forces can come together.

It's nothing less than challenging capitalist modernity with the idea of a democratic modernity: of a democratic modernity with a global and confederal structure, which will overcome the nation-state, industrialism and the capitalist mentality. As we cannot understand capitalist modernity just from one perspective, so also democratic modernity will have different shapes and colors. It's not a monolithic but a diverse system, like the capitalist societies around the world today. As internationalists in Rojava, we understand ourselves to be militants uniting democratic and revolutionary forces in order to overcome capitalism.

What is the response of the local people to your presence in Rojava?

Clara: In a society where the saying "the only friends of the Kurds are the mountains" is widespread, and where so many young people left the country, people appreciate our presence a lot. They understand it as friendship between the people around the world.

Casper: In many families, we are seen as their daughters or sons — and that's not just a saying. We can feel it. By becoming part of society, we have a growing responsibility to defend its values.

In your observation, how has the revolution in Rojava shaped the lives of the people on the ground?

Casper: One of the really obvious examples is the use of the Kurdish language in public, in school and in the self-administration structures. Language is an important part of identity, and so the attempt to wipe out the language was a serious attack on Kurdish culture and identity. For students to be able to study their own history in their own mother tongue is a major change.

Another significant achievement is the chance for all people to participate in the political structures and decision-making process. Under the Ba'ath regime, these basic rights were taken away from the Kurdish population, and they had no possibility to express their interests. Now, in the communal structure, people are learning to use the tools of radical democracy through local assemblies. Society is becoming really political, as people take responsibility for their united destiny.

Clara: I would say the situation has changed the most for women. They are affected by all the aspects Casper mentioned but additionally by patriarchal structures in society. Before, women could not participate much in public life and patriarchal family structures and social expectations were strongly affecting personal and social life in general. To give some examples, it's now forbidden to marry women under the age of 18 or for men to take multiple wives.

The participation of women in the different social and political structures is also more visible. This is most obvious in, but by no means limited to, the military structures of the women's self-defense units (YPJ). Women are also experimenting with different ways of living. The woman's village, "Jinwar", is a place where only women are living together in a communal way.

What are the relations between the internationalist commune and the international volunteers who have traveled to Rojava to join the armed struggle?

Casper: There is no organizational link between the two. But of course people know one another and share their experiences and thoughts. For example, the people in the military structure often don't see much from civil society, so we share our experiences with them. And comrades who return from fighting on the front line against the Turkish state, Al-Nusra and ISIS share with us the realities of war.

Clara: And even if we did not choose to join the structures of YPG and YPJ, we know how important it is to be ready to give everything for the revolution, even our life, and to face the traumatic experiences of war. To honor and remember also our comrades that fell *şehid* (i.e., were martyred), we named our academy after Hêlîn Qaraçox (Anna Campbell), who was killed by NATO warplanes from Turkey in the Afrin resistance.

How do you see the revolution in Rojava developing, and in what ways can people abroad contribute to its success? How can people abroad express their solidarity with the revolution in Rojava in the most effective way?

Casper: The time after the liberation of Raqqa from ISIS can be seen as a new era. The more or less stable consensus between the international powers is beginning to give way once again. Every state is trying to increase its influence in the region. The revolutionary forces in Syria — the Kurdish movement with its Arabic and Christian allies — are again trapped in the middle of a nexus of global superpowers. Now, even more than before, the success of the revolution will depend on the strength of the people here and around the world. The only real alliance of the revolution is that between the revolutionary and democratic people around the world.

Clara: We have to understand this as our responsibility, and one in which we must play an active role. Our actions can and will shape the reality of tomorrow. In this sense, it's important to keep up with solidarity work around the world. Even today, many people don't know about this revolution or the values it's based on. So everyone must share this with others around the world.

Casper: We know that the next big war is upon us. Especially with the fascist Turkish regime at the border, we all know that there will be no peaceful solution in Syria. For our friends around the world, it's important to understand and prepare for this certain eventuality. We have to be more effective in our work, at all levels of politics: we must spread knowledge about Rojava in society and, at the same time, increase the pressure on our governments. But the most important aspect is to build ties between the Kurdish freedom movement and the struggles in other countries.

The internationalist commune falls in a long tradition of leftist solidarity with revolutionary struggles across the globe, from the Spanish revolution to the Zapatistas. How do you place yourself within this tradition, and why do you believe it is important?

Clara: Without this history, we cannot understand the current situation. And even more importantly, we cannot give the right meaning to it. It's so easy for people to give up the fight, in a system that's telling you there is no alternative and that all attempts to build an alternative have failed. Instead, we have to see that resistance was always there, even if it was all too often hidden in the shadows. But if I see the fights today as the heritage of the Spanish war against fascism, and the struggle against colonialism around the world, my energy and motivation are redoubled. In this sense, we see the history of internationalism as our history. We are part of one continual, living line of internationalism.

Casper: Today, the Commune is in Rojava. But the idea of the Commune is an internationalist one. It's not only about the Kurdish freedom movement. It represents internationalism based on the idea that as long as everybody in this world is not free, nobody is free.

What is your message to the global left?

Casper: Well, because I come from Europe my call for the European left would be that we have to rethink our methods of political organizing and fighting, as well as our ideological understanding. If we really want to make a revolution, we have to get organized in accordance with that aim and develop a long-term revolutionary perspective.

The Kurdish freedom movement can help us with that. We as revolutionaries have to learn again how to connect with society. We are part of it, we are fighting for it, but too often our fights are disconnected from it. And we have to learn to overcome our divisions. That does not mean we must all become the same, but we must find a way to use our differences in a productive, inspiring way, through which everyone can learn and develop.

Clara: In the end, our call is at once really simple and incredibly difficult: let us build together a global movement that is able to challenge and overcome capitalist modernity. Towards that end, we can look back to a long history of different struggles, which together are the path along the line of the resistance of the people, for a free life of the people, in balance with nature.

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