

Rojava: An Anarcho-Syndicalist Perspective

Karl Blythe

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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 nevermind their official representation in leading parties.

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

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 its armed militias the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) decided 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 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

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!”

of the general abolition of the State, but organizing democratic autonomy inspite 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 it's 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

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