

# **Anarchists in Rojava**

**Revolution is a struggle in itself**

Tekoşîna Anarşîst & União Libertária

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União Libertária, a group of young libertarians in Portugal, came into contact with militants of the Tekosîna Anarsîst (TA, Anarchist Struggle in Kurdish), present in Rojava, in northeastern Syria. This is a militant conversation around the reflections of this voluntary anarchist group around justice, art, religion and what it is to be "revolutionary". TA, in addition to having participated in the difficult fight against the forces of the Islamic State (ISIS), currently also functions as a unit of combat medics, assists in agricultural work and plays an educational role.

## 1.

**We have seen statements about the work of TA outside of the battlefield, from medical support to education. This second one is of great interest to us, could you please clarify a bit on how you proceed with educational campaigns, not only amongst yourselves but also with local communities? Are there any lessons you wish to share about the role (and process) of revolutionary education? How do you see pedagogy as not only a tool, but also a space within the struggles you must face?**

Education is what builds the foundations of a new society. It is often our best tool to defend ourselves and our communities. The kurdish liberation movement values education a lot, and this also brought us to reflect on our approach. In rojava it is a common practice to join educations of several months, where militants from different places have no other work than learn and develop. This is not a new practice from rojava, the kurdish movement has been working on their educational methods for decades. Joining some of those educations, we also noticed how much our understanding of education is connected to school, university and other state systems. And how much we should develop our own educational programs, shaped by our own political views and values. In this, the pedagogy of the oppressed of Paulo Freire can give very important perspectives.

Revolutionary education can be everything we do, if we learn from it in an organized way. Closed educations allow us to work deeper on one topic, like learning about the philosophy and political views of Abdullah Ocalan, study the proposals of Makhno or Malatesta about organized anarchism and the different attempts to put it in practice, or learn about first aid and medical care during war situations. But this also has to come with practice, which is often the best education, like when we work in society with our kurdish, arab and other comrades, when we build our organization day to day, or when we work as combat medics in the front lines. Theory brings knowledge and helps to build understanding and confidence, but is practical work what builds our experience.

Some knowledge we carry with us, is scarce here, and is important to collectivize it. We have been running educations of first aid and tactical field care to kurdish, arab and armenian comrades. We also shared our knowledge and experiences among ourselves, sometimes in short seminar formats sometimes in longer closed educations. This helped us to build our capacities and a common frame as organization, practically as well as ideologically. With time, our methods and systems of education are getting more adapted to our needs, reflecting not only of what we want to teach and learn but also how we want to do it. For some comrades it is helpful to read or listen a seminar for several ours, for others is better to do things and learn on practice. We try to keep this in mind but also challenge ourselves, like by encouraging comrades that are more

familiar with academic areas to work on the ground, and push for ideological development and theoretical works with those more oriented to field work.

## 2.

**In previous statements you have discussed the need for revolutionaries to disengage from individualistic, selfish mindsets, as well as issues of ego when dealing with comrades and organization. How have you within TA managed to deal with such mindsets? We recognize this view, where anarchism and revolutionary struggle continuously straddle a difficult line between lifestyle and commodity, not allowing us to build meaningful relations on the march to liberation. Are there any lessons or warnings from your own activities that can be parted?**

That is a very difficult question, because it is one of the main challenges we face. Anarchism has always discussed the contradictions between individual militants and the need revolutionary organizations. We are working to balance those points, because we see very important arguments to be made on both sides. As many anarchists before us, we reached the conclusion that organization is a necessity, not as an aim in itself but as a means to an end. We don't accept unnecessary hierarchies and we value the individuality of our militants, often referring to the idea that "there is no organization without militants, there is no militant without organization". With this we also want to point out the importance of individual responsibility towards the organization, as well as collective responsibility of the organization towards the individuals.

Becoming a militant of a revolutionary organization comes with individual and collective contradictions. The main aspects of our personalities have been shaped by the societies we have grown up in. Life in capitalist modernity relies on individualization. In school, in the work place, in the media we consume, we are told that individual freedom is everything that matters. "Your freedom ends where the freedom of other starts" is often the main idea running our societies. It denies collective belonging and it promotes individualist mindset and values. Is therefore no surprise that individualist anarchism manage to thrive in those capitalist societies we come from, because it connects with those individualist values that liberalism promotes. We want to challenge that. We believe our only way out is solidarity and mutual aid, and for this we have to challenge the deeply rooted individualism that we all carry with us.

Individualism can take many forms. Some are more obvious, like selfishness, elitism, or narcissism; but more subtle forms can take more time to notice, like refusing help when needed, not sharing information or knowledge with comrades, not listening or considering others proposals and ideas. We all have traces of individualism, and they are often connected with our ego and the image we have and we project of ourselves. Overcoming this requires that we are able to evaluate ourselves and others as well as our ways of relating. Criticism and self-criticism go hand in hand, we need to be able to acknowledge our shortcomings to meaningfully engage with the shortcomings of others. Admitting to ourselves that there is a difference between how we perceive ourselves/how we want to be perceived and how other perceive us can be painful. However acknowledging that gap opens the door for us to develop. Everyone has this gap, for some it is wider, for some it is more narrow, and to challenge it can create space to grow and learn. Keeping this in mind, we can build better relations that are founded in honesty and trust.

Trust is scarce in our societies. It is much easier to learn to suspect, to be afraid of your neighbor, to step on your co-workers to get upper hand and get a better piece of the cake. Capitalism relies on competition, and lying and selling yourself, on the society of spectacle. There is no place for honesty and trust in a system that is based on performance, on appearance of what you are not, on faking it and believing that one day you will make it. To be honest and transparent with our comrades necessitates vulnerability. We had been told to hide those things, to not let others see our weak points, to present ourself as the all-capable person that can do anything that is needed. All those individualist traits play against us, specially in difficult moments when stress and hardships reveal the things we try to hide.

We have been working on these issues by putting into practice tools like tekmil and platform, which we learned from the kurdish movement. We also explored other methods, and lately we have been deepening our knowledge on conflict resolution, with restorative circles and transformative justice. Transformative justice provides a good approach, connected to our ideological values and oriented towards topics like responsibility and accountability, that should always be the base of our organizing. We learned that organization is a struggle in itself, and that contradictions, conflicts and challenges will always arise in our organizing. In absence of hierarchical structures, how we take decisions and how we solve conflicts is a very important part of our organizing.

### 3.

**Maybe related to above, how is inter-personal conflict resolved at large in NES? We have seen several abstract perspectives, but little of actual accounts on the processes of justice and equity, how are such issues dealt with? Do the several autonomous groups have the freedom to deal with them “in-house”? Are all conflict resolutions centralized?**

There are currently two justice systems at play in NES. One similar to state justice and one more based on communitarian justice. The communitarian system consists of peasant consensus committees and local councils that are often composed of religious leaders and community elders. These encourage people to take responsibility and agency over their own problems. However this system is not working so well, unfortunately. Because of this many conflicts are still settled through the state-like legal justice system that is half inherited from the Al-Assad regime and half reorganized by the Autonomous Administration. It is an awkward mix that works with the tools at hand in a difficult situation. The union of lawyers played an important role, as well as the effort to write the “social contract” of AANES, some kind of constitution that is revisited every few years in discussions with different political and social organizations.

The reasons that lead the Autonomous Administration to put more efforts to reorganize the general legal system instead of promoting the communitarian justice councils is not so clear to us. We suggest you talk to justice committee of the AANES directly, they will be better able to answer that. Besides these, there are also the women’s autonomous structures such as the women’s houses (mala jin) and women’s law. These have played and are playing an important role in addressing problems around gender as well as finding solutions around family conflict concerning women (marriage, divorce, abuse, etc.).

Councils, committees, communes, and autonomous organizations have some degree of freedom to deal with conflict “in-house”. How exactly it is approached and if people involve the

state-like legal system depends on the nature and size of the conflict as well as the people and groups involved. With crimes that have big social impact, like brutal murders or organized treason (giving intelligence to Turkey that is used to assassinate revolutionaries, helping ISIS to plan and carry out attacks), there have been popular trials. Those trials gather different representatives of the social community, especially those more affected by the crime judged, and function as popular jury to decide the penalty.

For our organization and for organizations in Europe we think it is important we come to understand the value of transformative justice, and that we build capacity to start offering alternatives to the legal 'justice' system, which is a racist ableist punitive lie and deeply connected to nation-state power. The topic on transformative justice has been on the table in leftist circles in Europe for a while. We see it is slowly moving into a more practical phase now. Let us start with small practical adjustments, once we start gaining some experiences from the daily life, we can and should supplement them with some reading/study/theory. Conflict resolution cannot be learned from books, its fundamentals can only be learned in practice, books will be very helpful to improve us but only if we are already putting it in practice. We will have to make many mistakes, and that is fine. We have a lot to unlearn from the state imposed systems of 'justice'. We are making an imperfect start by using tools like *tekmil*, restorative circles and autonomous women's structures to build on this.

#### 4.

**What is the current status of art and self-expression within Rojava? Has there been the chance and space for people to be able to perform, create, or show artistic creation? How is such received? How has the changing facets of the conflict affected it?**

Tevgera Çand û Hûner (Tev-çand, the organization of art and culture) is a coordination of all the art and culture centers, present in every city. Most of those centers have different groups, like dance, music, theater, cinema, paint, literature, sculpture, etc. They mainly promote art connected to Kurdish culture, language and identity. Every ethnic group is encouraged to promote its own traditional art and culture while also making space for other forms of art outside folkloric tradition. Tev-çand has a political approach to art, seeing it as a vehicle to share and spread the values of the revolution. A couple of successful examples are Hunergeha Welat — with their YouTube channel publishing new songs and videoclips made in Rojava — or the Komina Film a Rojava — the cinema commune that produced several movies, shorts, clips. Komina Film a Rojava recently published a series about Rojava called "Evina Kurd" (Kurdish love).

The local groups often perform in local celebrations, festive days and other cultural events. In the last years some of those groups and artists are gaining experience and getting more professional, and we start to see their art in different theaters, expositions and events. Art is seen as popular and cultural wealth, and there is no process of commodification around it. Theater, cinema and music are performed and shared for free, and we have never seen any cultural event with entrance fee. This is part of the political approach on ethics and aesthetics that is promoted. To keep it short, we can simply point the efforts to connect aesthetics to political and ethical revolutionary values. This approach challenges the standards of beauty that capitalist modernity tries to impose, seeing art as a vehicle of expression of the people, of the society and its values. A lot of art is connected to the resistance against ISIS and Turkish fascism, with special focus

on women's resistances and YPJ, but also about the historical roots and struggles of the kurdisch people.

In that approach to art we can see a shift that the revolution brought, that maybe started even before rojava. Kurdish cinema from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often tragic, about the massacres and the exile that kurdisch people suffered. Dengbêj, a traditional music/poetry, is also infused with stories of destroyed villages, murdered families and orphaned children. It is in this new century that kurdisch art has started to reflect a new image. One not so focused on kurds just as victims of inhumane tragedies, but also as actors of change. The songs of YPG and YPJ defeating ISIS or the guerrillas fighting in the mountains, the new movies of the resistance in Sur or in Kobane, the big celebrations of NewRoz (kurdisch new year) are examples of a rebirth of the kurdisch people and their will to resist. They are not just a people whose faith is suffering, they are a stateless nation whose land has been occupied and whose villages burned down. They learned from other anticolonial struggles and from revolutionary movements of national liberation and they will take their destiny in their hands. They will defend their land and their culture, building a future for next generations, with weapons but also with music, with dance, with cinema.

## 5.

**What is TA's view on the role of religion, and how has it affected their capacity to connect and relate to local communities? Have there been challenges, or changes in attitude of the militants? In the west we struggle to separate anti-clericalism from base islamophobia and eurocentrism, what lessons have you gained from your insertion in Kurdish and Arab societies?**

Religion is not the problem for us when it is connected to the people and ethics, it is a problem when religion is connected to power and rule. It is this wielding of authority that we are against, as you also touching with anti-clericalism. Some anarchists came here with atheist backgrounds, and when asked about our religion is easy for us to answer we have no religion. But this answer is often understood as if we have no ethics, and also made us reflect how most of us, even if not practitioners, had been raised in a christian culture.

We agree with you that we in the west can do a bad job at separating anti-clericalism from islamophobia and eurocentrism. The society we are in is overwhelmingly muslim (with small minorities of other belief), nearly everyone has belief in the Quran, even if not everyone describes themselves as practicing muslims. This reality grounds our work with people here. We should understand the importance religion holds to the people and local comrades. Knowing a little, or a lot, about islam is very helpful when we discuss with local comrades. Arguing from religion for a revolutionary perspective is a tactic that has proven successful. It is necessary to respect peoples religious conviction, but at the same time we also critique or question comrades when this leads them to take actions that are not in line with the revolutionary values in NES. There are efforts to build a democratic islam, looking at the ethical side of islamic religion and not so much at the Sharia law. This is a necessary process to come to terms with the aftermath of islamist fundamentalism carried out as theocratic fascism by ISIS. Though from the outside it might seem like ISIS is no more, the fight against its ideology very much continues here. In some regions of NES, ISIS ideology is still widespread and it will take time and effort for everyone to move towards a democratic islam.

## 6.

**Anarchist and so-called revolutionary movements in Europe have struggled for decades find something which can overcome our own weaknesses and smallness, looking at methods old and new. What is your perspective on this? Do you also agree or feel the movements are limiting themselves, and if so why? Lack of use of insurrectionary violence, lack of structures directing the struggle, lack of resources, lack of conviction?**

This is a very important point and question you bring up here. We agree that movements are limiting themselves. We see the issue at the core as a lack of organizations that can create and promote long term aims perspectives, as currently we mostly see affinity based groups with short term thinking.

The wave of insurrectionism in the 90's, especially in Italy, brought a short term struggle perspective that seemed to promote effectivity. In some ways, it worked, however it did so at the cost of undermining organizational capacity. Organization capacity is crucial. By becoming an organization, we as TA, now have the ability to accumulate experience, we do not constantly have to start anew. We can also build lasting projects and relations, we can deepen our understanding and learning of other organizations that have struggled and are struggling. Not only on an individual level, but on an organizational one. Meaning that such knowledge and experiences cease to become merely tied to one person or one cell or affinity group, but that the whole organization takes ownership of it. This greatly grows our capacity as an organization.

To develop as a revolutionary organization is not easy, we already talked about this. We have to break with the liberal individualist mindset that is so deeply ingrained with capitalist socialization. Our societies are organized around those capitalist values, and to change it we have to develop our own values and social institutions, to anticipate the society we want. The things you mention lacking in anarchist movements (structures to direct the struggle, resources, conviction, action) can often be connected to the lack of organization. If we find ourselves isolated, as individuals or in small groups, our capacity to influence and change the society around us diminish. As we can learn many things in Rojava, there are also many lessons we can take from the anarchist organizations in Latin America. The ideas of "especificismo" (English: specificism), a theoretical frame oriented to develop specific anarchist organizations, are the result of decades of struggle. We can track them back to platformist proposal of Peter Arshinov and Nestor Maknho, but developed in practice by the Federacion Anarquista de Uruguay (FAU). As Portuguese anarchists, you have easy access to the materials and texts developed by Brazilian anarchist organizations.

## 7.

**There was critique recently of the focus and resources given by western leftists towards nascent anarchist movements in Ukraine, who, without true autonomous structures and being inserted in statist armies, have received generous support and funds, while non-white movements have struggled for a fraction of this support. Do you agree with this critique?**

We assume you are referring to the article "Anarchist who Fought in Rojava: Response to 'No War But Class War' Debate", that can be found on Abolition Media. We agree with the article that the amount of resources sent to Ukraine from western leftist is very disproportional with



the amount of material support comrades in NES have gotten, especially given that the revolution here is so explicitly rooted in libertarian revolutionary ideology and praxis, where this is more debatable for Ukraine as the article pointed out. “Solidarity is something you can hold in your hands”, a slogan popularized by the anti-imperialist group KAK, active in Denmark in the 70s, is a statement we can very much find ourselves in. While NES has gotten an alright amount of solidarity pictures, awareness campaigns, diplomatics campaigns, etc. on the side of material, financial or other support that we can “hold in our hands” the western left has absolutely not given it serious effort.

That being said, the war in Ukraine has been going on for a bit over a year now, the war in rojava for over 10 years. Of course these timescales also have an effect. Ukraine is on the news and we aren't, we won't be either, until a new invasion, and even then we will only receive a fraction of the media attention that Ukraine is getting. When we look broader than Ukraine and rojava, we ask: who has been looking at the genocidal warfare in Tigray or the recent war unfolding in Sudan? Who has been organizing material support for those conflicts? The Tigray peoples self-defense forces have a long revolutionary tradition, with a project similar to the ideas of democratic confederalism. In Sudan we have recently see a military escalation after big mobilizations and uprisings shook the country, that had a remarkable anarchist organized movement not common to find in most of African countries. But few articles are written about it, and even less anarchist book-fairs discussions about those conflicts. It is not fair either that those movements received little to no media coverage, let alone material support. This is part of the colonialism that we are trying to fight against. For us this is also a reason to stay with rojava, where values of anticolonialism are very much alive.

Coming back to Ukraine, Anarchists have been struggling since the beginning of the recent conflict, they were there at Maidan square and tried to organize form there. Probably this is not the place to discuss how much this movement is rooted in the historical anarchist movement in Ukraine, with the Black Liberation Peasants Army and the Makhnovist revolution, but nowadays the presence of anarchists is crucial to question the nationalist narrative of the far-right, that has been a dominating presence in the protest in Ukraine from the start. We have a responsibility as anarchists to take our place in such times, we cannot leave all the space to the far-right, because if we do they will take it. Now the current situation in Ukraine is not a revolution aligned with our principles, but it is our task to push our principles to the forefront and make them known. We can quote Malatesta when saying that “We are in any case one of the forces acting in the society, and history will advance, as always, in the directions resultant of all the forces”.

Historically war and revolution have an important connection. War environments see state authority stumble and authority diffuse in some places. The state isn't always there anymore to provide people with infrastructure and resources. This means there are often windows of opportunity to assist in the self organization and management of the people, initially primarily along lines of mutual aid and solidarity. This is a situation in which bringing our ideology and applying it in practice with the people can be a useful way of strengthening our tendency, as Malatesta says.

We support our anarchist comrades fighting in Ukraine, we have an approach of critical solidarity to the people of Ukraine and aim to engage the contradictions that it brings up and not devolve into a binary and dogmatic approach. We would also like to draw your attention to comrade Leshiy and comrade Ciya, they have both spend time in NES and fell on the Ukrainian front lines together with other anarchist comrades in Ukrainian front lines. We grieve this loss, and

aim to learn from their lives and decisions, they also show us a way of nuanced analysis and consideration that has space for the contradictions that inevitably come up when we get our hands dirty in revolution. We agreed with the comrade who wrote the article that it is very easy to be purist and judgmental about decisions made in Ukraine and rojava from a comfortable armchair. Participating in an actual revolution or armed conflict will quickly make it clear that there are often no “clean” or clear-cut solutions and being a revolutionary in action, not just in words, means gaining a deep understanding of nuanced analysis and contradictions.

## 8.

### **How can we assist you in TA; materially or otherwise?**

The main points in which we can see your assistance to be help us are; a) ideological development b) engaged network c) resist repression d) militants e) resources

- a. Ideological development of anarchist struggle is the basis for us to move forward. We see that we have come to a point where we realize as european anarchists that affinity based organizing alone is not sufficient. We need anarchist organization or structures that keep us together not just based on personal affinity, but in an organized way, to be able to think long term and develop a wider strategy. By further developing anarchist ideology and praxis in our current context, we strengthen each other.
- b. Engaged networks are a foundation to exchange discussion, projects, resources and experiences. We see this in the form of building long term relations with solid organizations, and such exchange can take place through visits and exchange of militants as well as other forms of communication. Related to the point about ideological development, this includes reading and discussing each other statements and letters, learning from each other experience and giving feedback, proposals and critique on them.
- c. Networks also leads into resisting repression. In the past years, militants who have been to rojava and the kurdish movement in general have been increasingly criminalized. Quite a few comrades are spending time in prison or are in other kinds of legal problems. We need anarchists everywhere to push back against this criminalization.
- d. We need more militants to join us in rojava to fight and struggle here. There is also opportunity for comrades are already organized in europe to join us here while remaining connected to their european organization. We would like this actually. We see this as a potential way to strengthen ties between our organization and anarchist organizations in europe.
- e. On the directly material side, we need money. Since exactly what materials we need changes from time to time, sending materials directly can be a little tricky, though we can talk about this if there is a desire to do something like that. With money directly we can allocate it to the most pressing needs and make adjustments when necessary in this every changing situation we are in.

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