

Class struggle in Iraq

Interview with a veteran

Workers Scud

June 1991

Q: Can you briefly tell us about the class struggle in Iraq before the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958?

A: In the 1940's and early 1950's the class struggle was mainly situated in the rural areas. Peasant uprisings (eg. in Aali-azarchi which lasted about 3 years before being violently suppressed) were a constant headache for the semi-feudal landowners and the state.

Urban struggles intensified with the nine-day strike of Kirkuk oil workers in 1946 (put down with loss of 10 lives). Unemployment and homelessness were rampant. There were thousands of sarifas (shacks made of palm branches) around and inside Baghdad.

1956 (Suez Crisis) had a massive impact on Iraq, with demonstrations against the Iraqi regime who were seen as British stooges. The Palestinian issue also helped radicalisation. I still wonder why there wasn't a revolution in 1956! These internal and external events led to the formation of the Free Officers (nationalist/Nasserist) who had links with the Iraqi 'Communist' Party (I.C.P.) but not so much with the Ba'ths.

Q: The way I see it there were two main contradictions in the Iraqi society at this time (1946- 58). One between the emerging proletarian movement and capitalism and one, left over from the past, between capitalism and the feudalist landlords. Do you agree?

A: No, I don't agree with this neat and simple text book analysis, because even prior to '58 the feudals owned not only the rural areas but also a huge portion of the urban areas. Hotels, factories, and residential areas belonged to them as well as the village. The majority of peasants' were therefore proletarians, but with a far worse living standard than their urban counterparts.

Q: In 1958 Qasim and the Free Officers seized power and ousted the Monarchy, but some of the gains were recuperated.

A : That's true but the significant thing was the level of class struggle. The Monarch and some of his ministers were killed by those they called prostitutes. For one year or so no one could control the workers. Even the I.C.P. which unfortunately had a massive base within the population (despite its attacks on the working class) could not control the angry proletariat, basically because workers were armed. People took food from the shops without paying for them. For them money was obsolete.

Q: I hear that even the Koran was desecrated by the workers.

A: Yes that's absolutely right. They understood the reactionary nature of Islam. Also in Kirkuk about 90 generals, capitalists and landlords were taken to the road, had a rope put round their necks and dragged around by car until they were killed. I.C.P. denounced the actions and tried to distance themselves from workers' "excesses".

But gradually with land reforms, the rising price of oil and loans from USSR, the government managed to stabilise the situation in the South. Kurdistan was more resistant. Armed peasants groups (eg. in Halabja) were not intimidated by either the state or the I.C.P. and took over the land that the escapee owners had left (mostly fleeing to neighbouring Iran). The absentee landowners would send assassins to Iraq and with the connivance of the military kill a revolutionary and then flee to the safety of Iran.

Q: Why was there so much support for the I.C.P. and Kurdish nationalists despite their reactionary policies?

A: That is a difficult question. The people were not happy with either group and especially felt let down by the I.C.P., but there was no real revolutionary alternative so people tended to give the I.C.P. the benefit of the doubt and apologise for their 'shortcomings'. They would say naively: "The Iraqi Communist Party is young and is bound to make mistakes, but soon they would mature like their Russian and Chinese counterparts" (!!) I suppose there just wasn't the necessary consciousness to see these parties for what they are.

In 1963 Qasim was overthrown by the Ba'athists and a period of intense violence resulted in the death of thousands of activists. The Ba'aths were supplied a list of known 'trouble makers' probably by the CIA. During Qasim's last days the people demanded weapons from him for protection against the National Guards, but he refused to arm them. Even then the military were so unpopular that they had to trick the people in order to get into the cities. They put photographs of Qasim at the front of their tanks, the people thought they intended to defend them from the Ba'athists, so they were not opposed, until it was too late.

Q: The Ba'aths first experiment in dictatorship was unsuccessful but they got into power again in 1968. Can you tell us about Saddam Hussein's personal path towards power?

A: Saddam was a cut throat petty gangster, which is probably why no one took him too seriously at first. His role in the attempted assassination of Qasim was exaggerated later. Gradually he made himself a power base with the help of his Takriti tribe and important landlords.

During the 60s there was a critical re-assessment of the I.C.P. policies of United Front with the Iraqi bosses which eventually led to a split by 'Aziz al-Hajj who was influenced by Mao and Che Guevara. His guerrilla actions were unsuccessful and the group was defeated, but his ideas remained very popular. He is now Ba'athist ambassador to France!

Q: Unlike neighbouring Iran where guerrilla activity by leftists never threatened the regime.

A: Yes, in Iraq armed struggle was far more widespread. Assassinations of individual capitalists led to wide-scale armed confrontations, and it must be said these actions were extremely popular amongst the population. But the truth is that our security measures were inadequate. We temporarily controlled the streets because we had guns but when the '68 coup d'etat succeeded, we became very exposed. Even our leaders made horrendous mistakes, and a lot of comrades were arrested and executed.

I don't want to give the impression that the regime only used repression in dealing with the class struggle. No, they used the usual carrot and stick tactics and it worked. Between 1968 and 1974 the state became far more powerful. Again in 1972 the I.C.P. entered into a pact with Ba'ths. It is incredible how completely degenerate these Stalinists are. In 1975 the Algiers Agreement between Saddam and the Shah, meant that both leaders could turn their attention towards their internal problems. The Kurdish uprising collapsed very fast and Saddam became even more powerful.

Q: Can you now talk about your own break first from Stalinism and then from Leninism in general?

A: We knew some comrades in Baghdad, Basra and Kurdistan who were also dissatisfied with the prevalent ideologies. At that time, we thought armed guerrilla struggle was the be all and end all of the revolution, but gradually and under the influence of the Iranian revolution we became very critical of guerrilla activity.

I made two visits to Iran during the revolution and brought back new ideas. We became acquainted with Trotsky's critique of Stalin and later on we were introduced to anarchist ideas by comrades from Baghdad. There was a Lebanese journal, called Darasat al-arabie, which was critical of both Leninism and Marxism. We didn't always agree with them, but they influenced us greatly.

Q: Did these revolutionaries develop their own independent critique of Leninism or did they borrow it from the west?

A: Unfortunately us 'eastern' communists have always been awe-struck by our 'western' comrades, and looked in their direction for divine inspiration as muslims look at Kiblah (Direction towards which muslims turn in praying). Consequently we have always relied on them for an understanding of capitalism.

But gradually we came to realise that the previous parties we were involved in were like cages for our minds, stifling our independence. Consequently we rejected 'Third worldism' and 'Socialist' revolution and understood that the only worthwhile path is a Communist revolution (the abolition of wage slavery, money and the state). We began criticising Lenin here and there but a complete critique of Leninism came later.

At this stage we decided to form a new organisation called Fasileh (later renamed Kar). Our programme was very eclectic. It contained good and also bad things. With the help of some Anarchists we started publishing a magazine in Arabic and Kurdish. The level of class struggle inside Iraq was very low, but the regime's repression was fierce. The state tried very hard to find us but we were careful. Mokhaberat (security service) would offer reward for our arrest and finally they raided us.

I got away but a comrade was later arrested, and most probably executed. We decided to send some comrades abroad to learn from the experience of the world proletariat and establish internationalist contacts. But when we got here, we found the level of class struggle was even lower! This coupled with the usual refugee problems led to petty personal quibblings which made us forget the purpose of coming abroad. But now that things are beginning to pick up again, we have once again started to organise ourselves and meet regularly.

Q: The media here is explicitly giving encouragement to Kurdish nationalism. Can you tell us a little about the origins of Kurdish nationalism?

A: In the mid 50's there was no such thing as a Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq. Sometimes at times of crisis, capitalism would financially induce a Kurdish feudal landlord to organise

something, that they would name a 'nationalist movement'. In order to give these leaders credibility, the central government would move 'against' them.

At these times, there was no real Kurdish patriotic identity, it had to be artificially fostered. Arabs and Kurds viewed their struggle as one. Kurdish nationalist leaders who shared power with the central government, broke with them once they received support from the west and the Shah. But they lacked a popular base and had to escape to the mountains. They organised a militia but were defeated severely at first because their soldiers were not volunteers. Learning from their mistakes, they organised the Peshmerga — a guerrilla outfit — and looked for better weapons. They began to engage in sectarian murder. For example, they would get hold of an Arab driver and execute him for being an Arab.

Q: Sounds a bit like Irish nationalists over here?

A: Yes, very similar, Innocent Arab workers and students were murdered, and the government in turn would make capital out of this by publicising 'Kurdish' atrocities, whipping up anti-Kurdish sentiments. Iraqi generals would deliberately send young, inexperienced soldiers into Kurdish areas, knowing full well they were cannon-fodder for the peshmerga. The next day, a Kurdish village would be destroyed by the regular Iraqi army in revenge. All these tactics helped to divide the proletariat.

But despite everything, nationalism hasn't managed to create unbridgeable obstacles. Proof of this is the latest uprising. When Iraqis in the south rose up against Saddam after the war, their efforts were supported by northerners. Arab soldiers in the north, voluntarily gave up their arms to the Kurds.

Q: Finally let us talk about the future of the class struggle in Iraq. I think the Americans are still banking on a Romanian scenario, i.e a popular uprising from below followed by a preplanned coup d' etat from above to oust Saddam. Do you agree?

A : Yes, probably. But the Iraqi situation is more complicated than Romania, and the divisions between Kurds and Arabs, Arab and Turks, and Sunni and Shi'ite muslims could easily lead to a prolonged civil war situation. And the next regime will probably be more religiously orientated. So there are differences with Romania.

The strongest party seems to be the Al-Dawa (Shi'ite) which receives backing from Iran. The Radical Ba'ths are not very popular and has connections with Syria. The I.C.P hasn't got the power it once used to have but mustn't be underestimated. Its base, however, seems to be amongst the elder generations and not the young.

As for the Patriotic Union of Kurds (PUK) and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (DPK), they used to have about 5000 armed peshmergas before the recent events and are not as significant a force as the media makes out. The Kurdish towns are being taken not by the political parties but the people. Akhvan al-muslimin is the last powerful Sunni organisation being supported by both Egypt and at times US.

All in all it must be said that the future of autonomous proletarian activity in Iraq is not very bright.

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