

LESSONS OF THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION

Abandoned by the United States, the Rojava Revolution in northern Syria is being crushed. On the one side, there is the tyrant Erdogan and his genocidal Turkish nationalism. On the other side there is the butcher Assad with his Arab chauvinism. The balance of military forces is vastly unequal and, if any of the social achievements of Rojava survive, it will only be because Assad sees Erdogan as a greater long term threat.

The defeat of the Rojava Revolution is not the end, though. The Kurds have been defeated many times, and betrayed by putative allies just as often, but have always risen again. So it is vital to learn the correct lessons. What were the successes of the Rojava Revolution? Why are the Kurds suddenly confronted by two vastly better armed enemies? And what should be done in future?

The Achievements

The Rojava Revolution achieved much in northern Syria. The most obvious is the defeat of Daesh and the fall of its so-called “Caliphate”. The YPG-YPJ’s heroic defence of Kobanê and the subsequent drive to the east and south rid the world of a truly horrific barbarism. While Daesh’s “Caliphate” was an impossibility, it produced vast quantities of blood in the attempt to create one.

More important than the military victories, though, were the civil achievements of democratic confederalism. The improvement in the status of women in northern Syria will echo through the generations. Even if patriarchal religion forces women back into servitude, the memory of their freedom under democratic confederalism will live on and fire a burning hatred for their new oppressors. And the experience of local democracy, of different ethnic groups getting along in peace and equality, will only sharpen people’s detestation of the cruelty and oppression of the butcher Assad. The Rojava Revolution will live on in the hearts of the people who saw the benefits.

The Road to the Impasse

The Kurds are the largest nation on Earth without a State of their own. Instead, Kurdistan is divided between four other States, each of which subjects its Kurdish minority to national oppression. The struggle for Kurdish national liberation has been going on since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the imperialist carve-up of West Asia.

If the Kurds haven’t yet achieved their liberation, it’s not for the want of trying. They have risen in Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran many times. Each time they faced the same fundamental problem – they were outnumbered and economically marginalised in the country where they revolted. Their allies have always deserted them when it was convenient and exposed them to bloody retribution. It is famously said that the Kurds have “no friend but the mountains”. Unfortunately, while the mountains may assist Kurdish fighters to survive, they cannot help the Kurds to victory.

Abdullah Öcalan, the primary leader of the Kurdish struggle in recent decades, has had some important insights and developed new ideas. Borrowing heavily from US Anarchist Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), he rejects the State as a vehicle for national liberation and advocates bottom-up democracy, which he calls “democratic confederalism”. He also insists on equality for women, saying all bodies should have two co-chairs, one male and one female.

Democratic confederalism has been an important advance in northern Syria, allowing equality for Kurds and for a range of ethnic and social minorities, as well as those Arabs willing to work within its structures. Democratic confederalism also contributed to the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which absorbed the YPG-YPJ. It has not, though, been sufficient to counter the political isolation of the Kurds and their suppression by militarily superior forces.

To counter that isolation, the Peoples Democratic Union (PYD) chose to ally with the United States. The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group opposed this decision from the beginning (*Victory to*

the Rojava Revolution! 25 October 2014), warning that democratic confederalism and US imperialism were incompatible. We called for the PYD to break its alliance with the US and throw in its lot with the workers and oppressed masses of West Asia instead (*Drop the Charges Against Jamie Williams! 6 August 2015*). And, in the wake of the USAF bombing of Raqqa, we said in *The Anvil (Sep-Oct 2017)*:

The MACG recognises the right of groups struggling for national liberation to acquire arms from wherever they are to be had and to be judged on what they do with them. However, the collaboration of the SDF with the USAF, and allowing US special forces to be embedded within them, is politically disastrous and must be condemned as a betrayal and a strategic blunder of the first order.

The alliance with the US prevented the Kurds from allying with the oppressed masses of Syria, Iraq, Iran and, most crucially, Turkey. When the United States betrayed them, as everybody surely knew they would, the Kurds were left where they are today – with no friend but the mountains.

Where Now?

We have no military advice to give the SDF. They will make the best of the choices they face. It is clear, though, that little or nothing of the democratic confederal bodies will be left standing. The struggle must move to a new phase. The question of the hour is what that phase should be.

The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group firmly believes that the only road forward is class struggle. Öcalan, when he took up Bookchin's great insights, also took up his most profound mistake – the rejection of class struggle. The workplace is the source of the capitalists' power and also their Achilles' heel. And it is also the means by which the Kurds can find better friends than the United States or whatever regional power might be pleased to use them as expendable pawns.

In Turkey, for example (similar observations apply in other countries in the region), Kurdish workers are an important component of the working class in cities like Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. There, they are viciously exploited by the Turkish capitalists – as are workers of Turkish ethnicity. Joint struggle against the capitalists is in their clear material interests. National chauvinism, however, has been a key ideology binding Turkish workers to their masters and crippling their struggles. Only a small minority of the workforce is covered by genuine unions.

The burning necessity is to take democratic confederalism into the workplace and make it the basis of the struggle. Bottom-up democracy, with autonomy even at the lowest level, allows both unity and flexibility, while building trust between groups of workers who have sometimes been in conflict before. And there is a name for this strategy. It is called Anarcho-Syndicalism and was once practised in Spain by the CNT, which had a million members in 1936.

Democratic confederalism is a strategy of workplace struggle that can unite workers in Turkey and across West Asia against all oppressors. Such unity will bring all other strata of the oppressed masses in behind them. This, in turn, will fatally weaken the sheiks, the generals, the Islamists and, last but not least, the Zionist war machine in Israel. Revolution will be on the agenda.

The Rojava Revolution is being buried. But, if its democratic confederalism is sown in the workplaces, it will flower again, in a riot of freedom.

TAKE DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM TO THE WORKPLACE

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group