

Big talk with Tekoşîna Anarşîst

Hevale & Tekoşîna Anarşîst

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Rojava complexity

Anarchist Struggle (Kurdish: Tekoşîna Anarşîst) is the organized structure of libertarian revolutionaries who actively participate in ongoing revolution in Rojava. We took a chance to make an interview with the comrades. In first part of our conversations we discussed relations of A.S. with Marxist-Leninist organizations and contradictions in Rojava social development from Anarchist perspective. We didn't try to avoid complicated questions and uncomfortable topics and received very meaningful answers from Tekoşîna Anarşîst participants. We hope that this sincere dialogue will be important for libertarian readers worldwide.

Hevale: You participate in International Freedom Batallion (IFB). As far as we know this structure is managed by Marxist-Leninist parties such as MLKP, TKP-ML and others. How you manage to arrange your relations with this organizations in libertarian way taking into account military hierarchy and their non-libertarian ideology? Which benefits you see in collaboration with Marxist-Leninist organizations?

Tekoşîna Anarşîst: IFB was formed as a coalition of revolutionary organizations primarily from Turkey, mostly Marxist-Leninist formations, in order to support revolution in Rojava. The participation of international fighters and volunteers, in particular anarchists, was always a point of complexity. We do collaborate with these organizations to a certain degree due to our principle of non-sectarianism, with sort of a coalition of various forces that are doing solidarity work in Rojava. It is a part of our lesson that we learned here as anarchists – making enemies needlessly is a bad idea. However, these kinds of relationships are of course rather strategical and we always keep in mind that we have our own aspirations, our own path to walk as anarchists.

In fact, during the participation of anarchists and some other internationals in IFB, they have been continuously challenging political decisions made by these parties, often the decision making process was excluding the participation of international comrades.

As for military hierarchy, us being a military structure, we recognize a vital need of forming an effective fighting force and for that some form of a command structure is necessary. For example, we as a structure have multiple positions and responsibilities which are delegated and rotated inside of the organization, for instance, a member of a collective who takes the responsibilities of military commander does carry a certain authority in combat situations, being responsible for military decisions. However, a military commander does not have any authority in our daily life and any other matters than those of a military. Furthermore, in daily life we attempt to maintain mechanisms that allow us to counter-act emergence of informal hierarchies and managing the group dynamics.

IFB has always been a frontline fighting unit. We would respect the decisions made by the commander of the battalion, as long as the commander is chosen based on experience and abilities, as well as the military decisions being made without interference with political agenda. If commander is proven to be incompetent, we would bring the matter to the “uni-team” which is a sort of the management committee of the battalion, consisting of all participating organizations. For example, in Raqqa, IRPGF, an anarchist organization in the battalion was a part of that committee. Speaking very generally and comparing with state and paramilitary state formations, a structure like IFB is much more democratic in some ways, respectively including particular democratic mechanisms and somehow more “free”.

Here, unlike some of our anarchist comrades, we don't use the term “democratic” in a libertarian sense, but rather in a neutral way, to underline a bottom-top system which allows participants

to make appeals in direction to the top, and make mutual criticisms, but does not include inner mechanisms of preventing authoritarian tendencies, regulating and balancing the power potential which such structure always embodies. We don't consider democratic tools as something we use in our organizational and political tools as anarchists; we have a different understanding of what "democratic" means, and what "libertarian" or "anarchist" mean. That is due to the fact that we have serious criticisms to the term of democracy and its use in political movements as well as deeper analysis of democracy itself. It is coming from anarchist experiences with democracy from all around the world. It is quite different meaning than the one which the democratic confederalism stands for, and there are reasons for that – the way how the word "democracy" is used here is very different. Ideology of the so-called new paradigm tries to re-invent that word and use it for the description of the free civilization that it strives for. However, that difference does not prevent us from listening to different comrades here in Rojava, opening up for various discussions and seeing where they come from politically and historically and learn from it. It is a very unique context and looking at it with the Western political approach and criticizing it from this point of view, would be a mistake. We should look and listen carefully, and not shut down our hearts from embracing challenging ideas and making ourselves stronger with that.

Overall, the armed struggle and political organizing both in Rojava and back in our home contexts is and will always be essentially full of contradictions and it is a lesson that we as anarchists have opportunity to learn from and find out our stance in it. To conclude for this question, however we are different from all the Maoist and Marxist-Leninist groups that are located here in Rojava, we disagree with many things and have our point of view on everything, but nevertheless we have a lot to learn from them in some things.

Hevale: Ideology of Rojava Revolution, i.e. Democratic Confederalism, promotes direct self-government and society-oriented economy. However we can see that still is unclear which institutions actually govern Rojava. In parallel with councils there exist some para-State structures such as ministries. The structure of mandate and elections in councils is also unclear. Certain continuous PKK party-control over society exists as well. In a sphere of economy we also see still widespread pretty capitalist relations, party-control over key economy sectors (oil extraction) and unclarity about if the situation is tending to change. What is your analysis and expectations about further social development in Rojava under these circumstances?

Tekoşîna Anarşîst: Here are two views we have on that matter.

First, one can easily come across some cadres of the Party and have discussions with them about these same topics, and some of them would honestly tell you that the situation here is rather a failure, and their ideology of Democratic confederalism and the reality in practice are very different. However, recognizing that they reached only small piece of what revolution was striving for, they would rather take it as the strongest motivation to question themselves and fully commit to make that reality different.

And we as anarchists also recognize that very often our ideas, the life that we all live and the world around us are so far from each other. So how do we approach this? Either we admit that this is the reality, that this is where we stand, and that we have a long way to go, or we hide these questions and challenges behind blind narrow-minded, sometimes even hurray attitude. Both are present here and our analysis is coming from a point of critical comradeship.

Here in Rojava, we and many other comrades we cooperate with, are working in solidarity with people of Northern-Eastern Syria and fought by their side against the Islamic State as well

as the turkish army and it's proxies. Thus it is one of the ways how we are practicing solidarity with the movement here.

But understanding of "the Movement" is also something that influences our positions. Who is "the Movement"? Is it the Party and its cadres? Is it all the institutions and ministries that exist here? Or is "the Movement" presented by all the "welatparez" families and martyrs that gave their lives to make the current, however not perfect reality in Rojava possible in these incredibly hard conditions? Or is "the Movement" also embodied by all people who want to live better lives, struggling every day against hardships of economy in condition of war, losses of the loved ones yet still standing by our side on the barricades simply because Assad's regime, Turkey and Islamic state are just way worse scenarios for majority of population? Different people here see that definition differently.

Obviously the real implementation of democratic confederalism here is known for radical social changes that represent most libertarian tendencies among neighboring regions. Everyone heard of gender quotas and woman/man co-presidency in councils and communes. In Mala gel (People's house or House of people) and Mala jin (Women's house or House of women) as well as the communes, there are educations so the ideas of societal changes can be shared and discussed. Overall education is very accessible to people and without cost.

There are also conflict resolution processes so that conflicts can be managed locally instead of taking it to court, but there is of course a particular judicial system as well as prisons, which are a reality here still as is progressing bureaucracy and control including centralized decision making. Here, the question of social change and for example prison abolition (as a big and serious topic and area of organizing in places beyond Rojava) faces challenges of IS insurgency and overall economical and geopolitical situation.

One way or another, situation here is so complex, that being too picky about who you work with or not, is a choice between life and death. It may sound like we are clearly pragmatic about the reality here, but where we really come from, is a desire to learn from this place and events here rather thanks to these contradictions, than in spite of them.

Secondly, everything that we see right now in Rojava displays very challenging situation which can offer us tips about how it will look like in the near future.

The fact that after the military defeat of the Caliphate in March 2019, the struggle against IS is far from being over. Fighting jihadists and their ideology in the desert is a very difficult task that seems to be accomplishable rather through social struggle besides an armed one, especially strong organizing of the youth and women. Sleeping cells of the IS increased their activity and at the moment it is a full-on guerrilla warfare, which targets key people in the society structures as well as military formations within SDF (which stands for the umbrella of Syrian Democratic Forces). Alongside burning crops in large scale and other everyday challenges, any attack of IS hits twice as hard and IS ideology is not something which can be eliminated in any close future.

Rojava is facing a difficult economic situation. Being sometimes labeled as a "war communism" but still being far away from bolshevik/stalinist economical and political scenarios, Rojava is under a sort of embargo and has to rely on smuggling and diplomacy, while not all the economics are completely under control of the administration of Rojava and there is a mix of areas with authorities of Assad's regime.

However, it is not possible to smuggle everything and such things of a level of for example gas turbines for power plants is something that is highly needed, the ones that are now in use are very old and need to be changed; but how to bring a gas turbine for the power plant to Rojava?

The whole geopolitical situation is extremely complex and not only in the economical matter. It constantly leaves the choice between lesser and bigger evils and cooperation with clear enemies, which is also given by the reality of the question of survival being a dominant one.

The system of cooperatives is inspiring, but it rather remains marginal and not providing answers for very complicated economical questions connected to capitalism. There are also still areas of land ownership by the regime of Assad or Syrian feudal businessmen on the territory of Rojava. And however there are attempts of developing ecological perspectives in Rojava, the climate crisis is visible here in very explicit forms which may be even bigger problem than everything mentioned so far, especially in the long run.

All that doesn't leave much space for a radical move towards different forms of economy in nearest future. Which doesn't mean that people will stop struggling and stop working on getting the best out of the local conditions. But how about people who are not necessarily part of the movement, people who are absolutely sick of war, and/or deciding about which side of the barricade to choose according to their material conditions? That all together is a challenge that we all are facing now here.

In that current picture we see the women's movement and autonomous women's structures as very important for anything to happen in the future. Out of all parts of the struggle and movement in Rojava and beyond, we see women's structures as something that stands in forefront of social change and represents most radical and progressive tendencies in both the society and the movement. Women's units of self-defense, autonomous space for development of women-oriented science, historical knowledge and conflict resolution led by women is an incredible change for this region which has to be maintained.

In the end of the day, many questions and problems are part of the matters of diplomacy. That is increasingly hard to manage with threat from Turkey, and dealing with Assad's regime, not so directly Iran and other political figures. Geopolitics remain a big topic of research and constantly field of tricky political game.

As anarchists, we rather find ourselves in a situation where we can't influence a lot but we can learn from that situation, this place and ideology here, because wherever other place in the world we would be, any idealistic views and blueprints of how social struggle has to happen in our contexts, will be confronted toughly and we one way or another will be walking very contradictionary path. It is necessary to develop an approach which would allow us to be flexible, open, understandable, and stand our anarchist ground, and our anarchist ideas and practices strongly, and to be very well organized.

Hevale: All tasks in Rojava are distributed in a way of strict limits. For example, people from military structures usually have almost zero opportunity to intervene into social issues. Also in every institution you operate in Rojava there are responsible people who can easily limit your ability to operate and to implement any initiative. What you think are your realistic tools to influence society and movement there?

Tekoşîna Anarşîst: The existing division between the military and civil society is sometimes not so strict. We can also speak about the youth movement which is itself a civil structure and is completely based in civil society. It does intervene into social issues and plays an active role in society. But at the same time they are very close to a military mentality and military type of organizing. Also, they do have military academies. Some structures, particularly youth structures are regarded as part of vanguard and are tasked with influencing the society, in order to develop a militant mindset and spread the ideology of democratic confederalism.

Another good example is Hêzên Parastina Civakî (HPC), a armed civil self-defense militia consisting of autonomous male and women structures. These structures are organized differently than the military, they are working with the concept of self-defense and they are primarily based in social self-organizing. Yes, they do have their own cadres, but they still are much closer to whatever you may understand under the term of people's self-defense than YPG/YPJ and overall SDF, which organization is much closer to the professional military structures.

There are various limitations and specifics in functioning within the revolutionary structures here in Rojava, whether that be civil or military. There is a reality of more or less strict controlling dynamics especially with the international volunteers and limitations existing to their initiative. Sometimes the dynamics between the "responsibles" (cadres) and people under their responsibility can be quite toxically hierarchical.

Some structures organize with internationals in being responsible for a specific structure and also with several people included. Movement here invites internationals in hope of fulfilling certain goals, specific purposes. Those not necessarily align with what internationals want or can contribute with themselves. In other words, there is often a difference between what internationals want to do and what the party will tell them to do. However, not all doors are closed for all the initiatives, even though a real influencing and working with the society is still very complicated question.

It is important to understand how things work here, how work is being done, how communication within an organization and externally is being done. It is very different from the home countries of volunteers coming to join events on the ground in Rojava. There is always a chance of achieving one's ambition. Yet very often it requires to put tremendous amount of work, pre-planning and pre-thinking about what you will do and how you will do it. It takes to be prepared to take a lot of initiative in networking and meeting new people yourself. To present and insist on the work you wish to do continuously and how it will be relating to the work of the movement here and it's perspectives and ideology. On top of that, understanding of people's relation and it's social code, is very important. For example, often work-related discussions and meetings are taking place alongside social events, and there is hardly any division between social interaction or event and a work meeting or discussion. Last, but most important, the absence of language skills will fundamentally limit one's ability to do basically anything at all. Good knowledge of all that is something that can be a tool for being part of what is happening.

In words of our fallen member, comrade and dear friend şehîd Şevger Makhno who was killed while defending Afrin from Turkish invasion, we ourselves might not be a huge change in what's happening, but what's happening will definitely make a tremendous change in and for us. This is where we stand between being part of what is happening in Rojava and learning from it.

The challenges for Libertarians

In the second part of our interview with the combatants of Anarchist Struggle they specify the role of their project in the context of global anarchist struggle and send a message to Russian comrades. This message reflects on deepest and most serious problems and aspects of current libertarian practice worldwide: the questions of self-dedication, criticism and self-criticism as well as one of organization. Comrades finalized their part by paying honour to the martyrs of anarchist struggle — Mikhail Zhlobitsky and Willem Van Spronsen.

Hevale: What is your concept concerning a place of your project in a context of global anarchist struggle? What role the group Anarchist Struggle want to play for the international anarchist movement?

Tekoşîna Anarşîst: The purposes of us, organize as anarchist and libertarian in the Rojava revolution can be summed up into critical solidarity and internationalism. We are here to practice solidarity with the people, the movement and their ideology here, but we also want to acquire a holistic and non-dogmatic understanding of the dynamics of this place, and eventually develop new perspectives on organizing, militancy and revolutionary process from the unique experience here. We as internationalists are committed to defend the revolution shoulder-to-shoulder with the people of Rojava, but simultaneously we are here to engage in praxis, to learn and gain experience and to develop ourselves in revolutionary ways and militancy. So that we can build, improve and develop revolutionary struggles elsewhere.

We do not want to simply replicate the methods, ways of organizing and ideological frameworks from the revolutionary movement here, and reproduce them in other parts of the world. Instead, we recognize that how struggle and resistance shall be organized should be based on the locality; the particular historical, social, cultural background of such.

We recognize there are shortcomings in how resistance and struggle elsewhere are organized currently but in particular drawing from the experience of European anarchist scene; that different nodes or aspects of resistance are atomized, there is a void in the ability to develop revolutionary strategy, holistic analysis and revolutionary blueprint that are able to organizationally and ideologically link up particular and localized struggles into a greater framework. We desire to contribute to finding the solutions to these limitations in order to move struggles forward. We want to create, advance and maintain infrastructure that can allow international anarchist/libertarian revolutionaries to learn, to gain experience, knowledge and different expertise from self-defense and social revolution, train, educate and to work in different capacities. Not just learning in an individual fashion, but accumulating knowledge collectively, taking up of responsibilities and self-organizing.

We also acknowledge the importance for queer people to participate and learn in the Rojava revolution, thus this project creates the possibility for people who don't fit into the gender norms and binary to be able to come to Rojava, which otherwise is at the moment still very hard place to be accepted when you have different sexuality or different identity than a binary one.

Hevale: What else important you would like to add now? Would you like to send any specific message for the Russian-speaking audience?

Tekoşîna Anarşîst: Okay so this one goes out specifically for Russian-speaking audience, but not necessarily in Russia. Russia and surrounding post-soviet countries have similarities and differences, and Russian speaking comrades are spread all over the world. Sometimes it seems like we speak very different languages and come from very different contexts. But there are many topics that we could all speak to each other about. Due to the fact that we are based in Rojava and experiencing quite different reality from our home contexts, we would like to mention several self-criticisms that are directed to us as anarchists in general; Russian-speaking audience is no stranger to the matters that we want to mention. In fact, some of the things that we want to point out are very actual for anarchists movement in Russia and neighboring countries. The intention of that critique made from the heart and comradeship, is to bring people into asking themselves questions that they may not yet have asked, and/or looking at things from slightly different angles. We don't pretend to come out with an in-depth analysis and we are rather posing

questions; all of these are topics, that we are discussing within our organization on a daily basis. We would like to share them with you all.

To begin with, we would like to point out to several things in relation to organizational culture. We see several matters that need serious reflection:

A common thing in the anarchist movement is a problem of something that we call “disposable relationships”. It means that people easily get involved into conflicts within the groups and organizations, and are not holding on to their comrades and relationships with them, treating it like if nobody has to care if people stop to cooperate and there are many people around they can work with instead. It literally means making enemies and separation needlessly. It typically goes in the circles again and again, and people “change” their comrades, collectives and projects like gloves. Some individuals are even taking personal and inter-organizational conflicts as a matter of war. Personal ego and patriarchal, competitive mentality often goes above common interests and even common threats that we are facing. These conflicts between us are hugely destructive and damaged a lot of anarchist and related subversive structures that were built in past 15 years in Russia, for instance.

Meanwhile, we don’t have effective solutions for many questions in the scale of the movement; for example, how to overcome such obstacles like economy and logistics, which would allow us to organize more in more committed and effective fashion, without putting entire capacities that we have into basic surviving in capitalism? How not to create competitive relationships between organizations or members and people outside of them?

How do we build collective understanding of tactics and strategy of the movement by constant sharing and progressing them, instead of making entrenched centralized decisions? How to formalize things to overcome informal hierarchy, without making party hierarchy? How not to exclude people after major shortcomings but progress beyond the usual solution of kicking them out, and give people meaning instead of creating separation? How to resolve conflicts effectively? How to create critical solidarity – comradary yet critical relationship between people and groups?

Here in Rojava, we learned that the formalized tool of bringing mutual critique and self-critique to each other and between organizations, which here is called Tekmil, can be used in an anti-authoritarian, healthy and horizontal way. At the moment, bringing critique to our comrades beyond Rojava is rather hard. Criticism is often seen as a personal attack and disrespect; criticized people have strong defensive reactions and have a high wall of their own ego that is very hard to overcome. On the other hand, Tekmil must not become a way to bash down your comrades but rather giving them critique in a loving way with perspectives and a belief that we all can change our destructive approaches and hierarchical mindset. It is a consequence of the societies we grew up in. We can create our own values, our own way how to relate to each other. Critique can be a gift, with belief in your comrades, that they can become better. Not with an aggressive intention, but rather with an intent of reflection and development. For that, a revolutionary culture of criticism and self-criticism needs to be developed.

Then, it necessarily comes to a point of reflection on a militant personality and commitment to revolutionary organizing. The lack of commitment is a big problem in anarchist movement. We all ask ourselves, how to approach daily life and relations with people in connection to our political believes? Is that something that we do at all? And inside of our organizations, how do we balance between the responsibility, individual wishes and desires, so we ensure continuation of some kind of our common line which, on the other hand, is what keeps us all alive and going?

How can we develop understanding that revolutionary organizing isn't a hobby or free time activity, and take it seriously without losing our desires and joy in life?

And finally, we see a lack of serious political analysis, which is necessary instead of constant reacting on the events that are happening around us. Which is also needed, but how to keep up with events happening, meanwhile not letting it to drag us away from building our own strength and figuring out a long-term strategy and understanding our tactics? And especially now, when FSB is in full scale war against anarchists and overseeing all dissent in Russia and beyond, how do we as anarchists understand self-defense beyond the physical/military one? How to not create an elitist cult or macho bullshit? There is a need of developing a focus with a serious analysis, with a deep understanding of not only actual burning social and economical issues, but also look back to history and see which things worked and which not, and look for deep connections in the present day. That is to say, there is a need of holistic approach to the anarchist analysis, and we don't necessarily mean academic research by that.

In all post-soviet countries (and elsewhere) a connection between widespread patriarchal reaction, "hurray" nationalistic chauvinism and necessity of struggle against prison system can be understood even on the most simple daily basis and you don't need to be a political activist or sociologist to understand what these things are about, and to know which side of barricade are you at – for instance, any average person in Russia or Belarus can relate to the topic of prison industrial complex or corruption, in one way or another.

There is a need of self-defense, both in terms of attack and creativity and building our own structures, strength and capacity.

Our Russian-speaking comrades have a unique heritage of historical experience of GULAG system and devastating experience of Soviet union, a look on it from anarchist point of view. It is something that drastically influenced every single detail of social and economical reality that we live in present day in a very specific manner. On the other hand, a patriarchal, chauvinist and homophobic state reaction is a reality which goes hand to hand with prison system and question of it's abolition. There is a vital need of strong movements influenced by and also inspiring abolitionist narrative reflecting on experiences of revolution, counter-revolution, prisons and patriarchy for at least last 150 years.

Creation and direct involvement into people's self-defense in various forms is needed, as well as strong participation of non-male comrades, with creating autonomous non-male structures which would allow to grow and expand diversity and include various groups of people. We think that there is a possibility of creation of new narrative with overall focus on struggle for prison abolition and new understanding of justice, uniting people in front of capitalism and wage labor, and strong focus and practice on gender liberation and libertarian forms of social organization. On the other hand, there is a need for strong organizations and reliable structures, as well as understandable open proposals to come up with when shit will start to go down and Kremlin will not be able to suppress social upheaval so effectively anymore – with not only proposing, but enacting our ideas directly.

For the last words, we would like to honor the memory of anarchist comrades Mikhail Zhlobitsky and Willem Van Spronsen, and many others, who gave their lives for others, who struggle behind prison bars. The legacy of our fallen comrades is lightening our path.

We would like to send revolutionary greetings to the Russian-speaking audience and thank for the opportunity to share some of our thoughts, hopes, and aspirations.

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