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Revolution in Rojava – an insight into the liberation movement in the Western Kurdistan

Interview with Ercan Ayboga, co-author of “Revolution in Rojava”, Pluto Press, 2016

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While the world watched in shock the raise of ISIS in late 2014, leaving a trail of destruction and unspeakable atrocities behind, Kurdish guerrillas came to put a halt to their seemingly unstoppable expansion. They achieved this after months of fierce resistance from the besieged town of Kobane. Their heroic resistance and the determination in defending their own people soon put the Kurdish liberation movement in the spotlight. Until that moment, few had noticed what was going on in Western Kurdistan, the Kurdish territory within the boundaries of the Syrian State. Then, all of a sudden, the world heard about the YPG, a guerrilla movement close to the PKK in Northern Kurdistan (ie., Kurdish territories in the Turkish State), a movement that in the highly sectarian environ-

ment of the last decade in the Middle East, respect all creeds and gives an equal standing to women in its ranks. They also heard that since 2011 the Kurdish movement had started building, from the bottom up, a new society based on the concepts of egalitarianism, direct democracy, communalism and respect for the environment. They called this unique system –that clearly distanced itself from State-centric political theories- democratic confederalism. The news about this movement have been an oasis of excitement in the midst of the calamities of a perverse war, capturing the imagination of millions around the world who see in this experience important lessons to build viable alternatives to the current global mess.

It is in this context that three activists (Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, Ercan Ayboga) who carried solidarity actions with the Kurdish people while based in Germany, decided to visit Rojava, one of the three regions of Western Kurdistan, to learn in detail about the experience, its challenges, difficulties, strengths and potential. It is thus how they ended up writing one of the best accounts to date of the Kurdish experience in Western Kurdistan, a must-read to anyone interested in helping to make the world a better place (**Michael Knapp, Anja Flach, Ercan Ayboga, “Revolution in Rojava. Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan”, Pluto Press, 2016**). We had the chance to talk with Ercan Ayboga, a Kurdish environmental activist who lived for many years in Germany but who is now based in Northern Kurdistan, about this book which will be available through Pluto Press at the end of October.

1. Please, tell us Ercan, how did the idea of doing such a book come about?

After the revolution started in Rojava – Western Kurdistan – in 2012 we, as the Tatort Kurdistan Campaign in Germany, had many efforts to get as much information as possible about the new political structures, projects and the characteristics of what was taking place there. Because the information was not enough and

liberation of women – this now we understand better thanks to the Rojava revolution.

Finally the revolution has given practical experience on how to develop an economy which is as self-reliant as possible, which has been also a necessity because of the embargo. Thus the embargo could have the opposite effect to that intended by Turkey, the KDP, the Syrian state and the jihadists-salafists. In developing such an economy, the ecological, solidarity and anticapitalist components are fundamental. Each of them presuppose one another. From this experience, progressive people and movements can learn too.

A continued successful revolution in Rojava will change and probably end in the middle term the war in Syria and have a strong impact on Northern Kurdistan and Turkey. It will affect directly the whole of the Middle East which is at the centre of the global conflicts of our times.

5. Where and when will you be launching the book?

The book will be published by Pluto Press in UK in late October 2016. Between September and October the book is being launched also in the other languages such as German, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Russian. So within a short time the book will be accessible in many languages and in many countries.

6. What are your future projects after this?

We as authors will follow up the developments in Rojava and Syria as well as in all parts of Kurdistan its neighbourhood. In the coming months we will very likely visit again Rojava. We do this because of two reasons: we have constantly presentations and discussions about the revolution in Rojava. And it is likely that the next editions of the book in English and other languages may need an update as the developments in Rojava are taking place very fast. Already now, after one year, the book may not be very up to date.

In short: we consider the book as a fluid document of the revolution in Rojava. It evolves with the revolution in Rojava and therefore, actually, it is more than a book but a living experience.

in order to get our own picture of the situation of this so important revolution, we decided to send a group of three activists to Rojava. During the preparations of the trip, we discussed not to have articles alone, but to rather produce a book. It was an ambitious project, that is why we used effectively each day of the whole 3 to 5 weeks in Rojava to see everything we could see, to talk with as much people as we could and to try to understand as much as possible what was there in front of our eyes. The fieldtrip in May 2014 was very productive and consequently in March 2015 the book had been published in German. Just afterwards the translations into other languages started and by late 2016 the publishing of the book in several other languages is expected, including Spanish and English.

2. What do you think are the main reasons why the story of what is going on in Rojava needs to be known?

The revolution in Rojava has been carried out in a period immediately after the failure of the popular uprisings in Middle East and North Africa. Syria and several other regional states drifted into new intensified wars and conflicts. While almost all regional and international powers started to act in the most destructive way in order to get as much of a strong role as possible in a new political in the Middle East and North Africa, in Rojava a progressive movement has been fairly successful. Since summer 2012 Rojava is not only alive, rather it is a great success story about how direct democracy can function, how people of different ethnic and religious identities can live together and how the patriarchal system can be weakened and the liberation of the women can be realized.

This book describes the contradictions, discussions and solutions developed by the political structures in Rojava, which has faced war and embargo from all quarters. Based on clever tactical and strategic approaches it could ensure a continuous social development. Apart from geostrategic discussions, the book analyzes the different spheres of the society including economy, education, justice, health and ecology as a whole. The book is written also for an

international audience and solidarity activists who want to learn in detail what is happening in Rojava, the world's most important revolution at present.

After being published in German, the content of the book has been updated and reorganized by the three authors and translators for each of the seven languages. When published in late 2016 it will also consider the developments of summer 2016, so it will be very much up to date.

There are several other publications on Rojava, of which some are very good, but they focus on certain aspects and no one covers as a whole the different dimensions of this revolutionary process.

3. *What has been the reception to the book so far?*

Up to date the reception for the book is quite good and we are very hopeful about the reception to the translated versions. The third German edition was launched in September. The book will be published within this year in seven languages. The translation, editing and other work for each of the languages has been done mainly by volunteers. Furthermore, different well known writers and activists have agreed to write a preface for each of the languages. In the last two years the three authors have done in total more than a hundred speeches in Europe and other parts of the world after their travel to Rojava.

Already dozens of requests exist for the publication in English which is also an indicator for the expected success of the book. This is all important to contribute to the raising the interest, debate and solidarity with the revolution in Rojava.

However, the book takes up its inspiration mainly from the ongoing revolutionary struggle in Rojava, as well as in other parts of Kurdistan and the Middle East. This is the main inspiration for us authors and for all of the volunteers helping with the translations. The more fighters in the ranks of the YPG and the YPJ, the more activists in the cities and villages and particularly the more women leading and deepening successfully the revolution, the more the book will be a success.

4. *Tell us, in a nutshell, which ones do you think are the most important lessons from Rojava to progressive people elsewhere?*

There are several lessons in our opinion. The first lesson is overcoming the nation-state in practice while building an alternative, not only at a theoretical level. All cultural, ethnic and religious identities can find themselves in the new political structures and political dynamics developed after the revolution of Rojava. Here an important progress could be made in reality. This aspect is crucial for any basic democratic development in the Middle East, but also in other parts of the world. If this approach becomes stronger in our world, we will have less conflicts and wars.

The second lesson is rejecting the state and strengthening society by building up direct democratic and self-governing structures from the lowest levels of society. The challenge is to give power to the communities which coordinate themselves on a voluntary basis. They will build up a new political system, but from the bottom up. The difference to parliamentary systems is that the local communities – in Rojava they are called communes in the residential streets, and people's councils on the neighborhood level – are the main power holders and cannot be dominated by the upper structures. Here the revolution has done some progress, but needs much more to be done. There are challenges and limitations since other actors are not in favor of direct democracy. These the revolution must handle too. Nevertheless the revolution does not give up and insists in its ideology.

The third and very crucial lesson is the liberation of women. Without the ongoing women's liberation, the revolution never would have been successful. The liberation of women, which is also the liberation of men and all other genders in the end- has started to be taken seriously by all political, economic, social and cultural structures in Rojava. People have started to criticize relentlessly the patriarchal ways of acting and thinking in their lives. Social and cultural liberation has the pre-condition of the