

The Rojava Experiment

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Rojava is an outcome of the struggle that has been waged by the Kurds for national liberation. Nonetheless, it has gone beyond even national liberation and has become an experiment to create a confederation of worker and community councils and communes to replace capitalism and the state.

Initially up until the 1990s, the Kurdish national liberation struggle was mainly influenced by Stalinism. However, in the late 1990s the movement began reflecting and analysing the failed experiments in Russia, China and Cuba which saw the Communist Parties in those countries setting up state capitalism in the name of revolution. As part of the reflection and analyses, the Kurdish liberation movement – in which the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) plays a key role – came to view all states as hierarchical and patriarchal institutions that, far from bringing freedom, always ensured the oppression of a majority by a minority that headed these states.

As part of this, by the early 2000s, the Kurdish liberation movement had come to be heavily influenced by some of the ideas – although not all – of the libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin himself started out his political life as a Stalinist but moved to anarchism before adopting a form of libertarian socialism based on communalism, social ecology, feminism and libertarian municipalism.

Under this, the goal of the Kurdish movement broadened to struggle for a revolution in the Middle East as a whole. As part of this desired revolution, and in line with its left libertarian and feminist orientation, the movement has explicitly stated that it does not aim to create a state; but rather a system of direct democracy that would be defined by people setting up assemblies, councils and communes that are confederated together. It has called this 'democratic confederalism'. However, there are contradictions too; for example there is a glorification of the symbolic leader of the Kurdish struggle, Abdullah Ocalan, that runs counter the egalitarian goals of democratic confederalism.

Nonetheless, in Rojava in 2012 – as the Syrian state withdrew from the area as the civil war erupted – elements of democratic confederalism (although not all) began to be implemented. As part of this communes, federated neighbourhood assemblies and a federated Rojava council have been established with the aim of ensuring that there is a direct democracy in Rojava without a state. Women play a central role in this and each community assembly, commune or council has to ensure gender equality amongst the mandated and recallable delegates that participate in these forums. This is one of the central pillars of the experiment in feminism.

In terms of the economy, it has been reported that the people in Rojava have also begun rolling back aspects of capitalism. Some sources estimate that 80% of the economy is now run through democratic workers' co-operatives. Small private businesses still exist, but they are reportedly accountable to the communes – and are mandated by these to meet the needs of the people.

To defend the Revolution, Rojava has established a democratic militia called the People's Protection Units (YPG), in which unit leaders are elected and recallable. The establishment of democratic militia has been part of shunning the notions of a hierarchical standing army, which are associated with states. Thousands of people – including from other countries – have joined these militia and have been engaged in struggle against various grouping wishing to destroy the revolution, including the Islamic State (ISIS). Women play a central role in the militia – in fact there are women-only militia's called the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). The YPJ are some of the best units of all and played a key role in the defeat of ISIS.

Rojava, however, does face threats. Internally a state may yet still arise, and the elevation and glorification of Ocalan is deeply concerning. Externally, the biggest threat to Rojava in the foreseeable future is Turkey. In January 2018, Turkey invaded parts of Rojava to stop the revolution spreading to its territory – which has a large Kurdish population. The invasion is ongoing. The US temporarily backed Rojava militia against ISIS. With the defeat of ISIS, however, it too could turn on Rojava. Despite the threats, Rojava shows a more just society can be created by working class struggles, even in the context of a harsh civil war.

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In this article, the first article of the education series on alternatives to capitalism, we look at an experiment that is taking place today, known as the Rojava Revolution, to overturn capitalism and the state system in northern Syria (which is being subjected to an imperialist and civil war). In Rojava a social revolution, influenced by libertarian socialism, has been underway since 2012 and a new society has emerged in the process.

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