

Interview with Turkish anarchists

Workers Solidarity Alliance

March 2, 2011

Anarşi Kolektifi Ankara (Anarchy Collective Ankara) is a synthesist organization of anarchists that has been active in the Turkish capital for several years. The Workers Solidarity Alliance decided to conduct a short interview with our Turkish comrades so that we can enhance the global connections of solidarity, learn about their struggles, and apply what we learn to our own struggles here in North America.

The interview here presents a very concise introduction to anarchist organizing in Turkey. In response to the broad selection of questions, the members of AKA address the social struggles that anarchists in Turkey are engaged in, particularly the queer and anti-militarist movements, as well as the deeper context of libertarian struggle in Turkey, such as the decline of Marxism and state repression of the revolutionary struggle. Especially intriguing is AKA's analysis of the militant Kurdish struggle for autonomy from the state. While many anarchists criticize the armed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) for their history of anti-working class nationalist actions or at best write them off as hopelessly Stalinist, AKA recognizes that there have been some legitimate theoretical moves towards anti-authoritarian positions within the organization, and that this opening presents a new opportunity for libertarian ideas to take hold in the broader Kurdish movement outside of the PKK.

The interview questions were answered by several different AKA members, so the answers reflect the different voices present within the organization. In one case two members decided to answer the same question separately.

WSA: What projects and organizing campaigns are you currently working on, as an organization and as individuals?

AKA: AKA is currently organizing a conference for International Conscientious Objectors' Day on 15 May. Conscription is obligatory for men in Turkey. Moreover, the Turkish military is a powerful political actor, because of its role as founder and protector of the Turkish Republic. There is a history of military coups in Turkey. Because of their anti-militarist principles, anarchists in Turkey struggle against all of these oppressions originating from the army. Until very recently, conscientious objectors in Turkey were all anarchists [*conscientious objection is not legally recognized in Turkey and is generally punished with torture and lengthy prison sentences – ed.*].

In the conference that we are planning for 15 May, we will mainly focus on three topics: anti-militarism, conscientious objectors and pacifism. Although these three terms signify different

things, currently in Turkey all of them are considered as somehow linked. This creates confusion. We want to create a space for discussion of these issues.

Also, as a part of Anti-Homophobia Days (with Kaos GL [*a queer center in Ankara with anti-authoritarian roots – ed.*]) we will conduct a workshop on queer anarchism.

Additionally, we publish an irregular political e-magazine called ‘Sanal’. We are currently working on the sixth issue. It is mainly based on translations from the international anarchist currents and theories.

WSA: What tensions and sites of conflict within Turkish society do you believe hold the greatest potential for anarchist organizing?

AKA: Other than the conscientious objection movement and workers’ struggle, in Turkey there is a trend, parallel to the global one, of urban gentrification. Many working class neighborhoods are destroyed by the hand of local governments (in partnership with the state) to make new ‘isolated’ bourgeois neighborhoods. These capitalist urban policies create huge unrest and potential for resistance. Anarchists in İstanbul, in co-operation with local non-government organizations, mukhtars (headmen) and residents, resisted gentrification in the Tarlabası neighborhood. They now have an office in Tarlabası (given by the local population) and they organize events in the area.

WSA: Are there anarchist organizations active in the Kurdish struggle for liberation? What is AKA’s perspective on the Kurdish struggle?

AKA: As a result of PKK [*Kurdistan Workers Party*] leader Abdullah Öcalan’s theory of ‘democratic autonomy’ adopted from Murray Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism, for the last few years anarchism has been popular among Kurdish people. Currently, the first Kurdish anarchist periodical (Qijika Reş – Black Crow) is published in Van, located in the Kurdistan region. There are also a number of anarchists and local collectives in Kurdish cities such as Diyarbakır and Van.

AKA does not have an ‘established’ perspective on Kurdish struggle, but in general we believe that Kurdish people should decide on their own destiny. We do help our Kurdish comrades in Van both by sending articles and distributing their periodical in Ankara.

WSA: What effect has the conflict between the state and armed leftist groups (not just the PKK, but also other small Maoist groups) had on the social and political conditions for anarchists? What do you think an alternative anarchist approach to the methods used by these armed groups would be?

AKA: [*First answer*] For sure, radicalization of local people is accelerated with the help of these movements, especially the PKK. However, it’s hard to make anarchist/anti-authoritarian propaganda among these (ordinary) local people in the climate of both the state’s repression and the armed guerrilla movements’ dominant discourse. Maybe civil disobedience and other anti-militarist methods such as conscientious objection can be used as alternative methods of struggle. In fact, apart from the anarchist/anti-authoritarian conscientious objectors and the anti-militarist movement, conscientious objection has become popular among Kurdish youth and recently a separate Kurdish anti-militarist movement has begun to rise.

AKA: [*Second answer*] First it should be corrected that the status-quo cannot be defined with the word ‘conflict’, but instead ‘war’ (a so-called ‘low intensity war’). At least 40,000 people have been killed during the war in the last 26 years. The last decade was marked by the aggressive strategy of the state to isolate the armed leftist groups in the western cities and force them to disperse. It’s known that minor Maoist armed groups are also active in northern mountains of

Kurdistan, particularly in the Dersim region. The war polarized the sides of the state and PKK. That the main aim of the PKK has been declared as ‘democratic autonomy’ by its leadership establishes that the solution is not to create an independent Kurdish state but a people’s federation without state and beyond capitalism (‘capitalist modernity’ in their terms). The new paradigm of democratic autonomy is full of references to well known works of anti- authoritarians such as Kropotkin. However it should be said that there is still a debate on the interpretation of the democratic autonomy proposal between anarchists.

WSA: Is there a history of libertarian/anti-authoritarian struggle in Turkey (although it may be outside of the specifically anarchist tradition) that anarchist organizers in Turkey can draw on to create a relevant and vibrant movement?

AKA: According to some people, libertarian views historically have roots in Sheikh Bedrettin’s revolutionary theology and among the Alevi religious community, which has a unique belief and life-style. On the other hand, classical anarchism was popular among the Armenian community before the 1915 genocide. However, we don’t have much information about the Armenian anarchists of that period (the last decades of the Ottoman empire).

WSA: How strong are anarcho-syndicalist tendencies within the Turkish anarchist movement?

AKA: Anarcho-syndicalist tendencies are weak among Turkish anarchists. Although there are a number of anarcho-communist collectives and some others dealing with class struggle, no real anarcho-syndicalist union or collective exists. Class struggle anarchists participate in left-wing/mass trade-unions as most of the other radical left-wing people do.

WSA: Are there other anarchist organizations in Ankara, and if so what kind of work are they doing? More broadly, can you mention some notable projects or campaigns that anarchists elsewhere in Turkey have initiated?

AKA: There are two other anarchist collectives in Ankara. One is mostly active among university students and deals with the local anti-fascist struggle and anti-militarist propaganda. The other one has a class-struggle perspective and mainly deals with struggle in one neighborhood in solidarity with poor people.

Anarchists in Turkey initiated the anti-militarist movement which mostly depends on individual conscientious objectors. The LGBT movement was also initiated and led by anarchist and anti-authoritarian activists. Nowadays some anarchists from Istanbul and Ankara are active in the no-borders and immigrant solidarity movements. Also, local ecology struggles (against hydroelectric dams, etc.) are supported by anarchist groups and collectives, as well as anti-globalism struggles.

WSA: For a long time social movements in Turkey have been dominated by the authoritarian left, particularly the labor movement. Do you think that people are turning away from authoritarian Marxism and looking for more libertarian alternatives, or are they just becoming liberal? Do you see much potential for more grassroots/horizontal practices emerging and replacing hierarchical practices in Turkish social movements?

AKA: A substantial portion of actual anarchists in Turkey come from Marxist backgrounds. Some converted to anarchism after they were expelled from their organizations because of their so-called undisciplined behaviours, some others saw authoritarianism as an obstacle on the way to liberation and equality so they changed their politics. The decline of Marxist-Leninist regimes

and the transformation of Turkey towards becoming a real 'liberal democratic' state had deep effects on left-wing revolutionaries, leading them either to anarchism or liberalism.

New social movements such as the LGBT, feminist, ecologist and anti-militarist movements are especially open to horizontal practices. Affinity types of organizations are more popular than ever. But (authoritarian) left-wing parties and collectives may still see these movements as their territory; that's why in some cases it's a bit difficult to organize at the grassroots level.

WSA: How are trans sex workers organizing in Ankara (and the rest of Turkey), and how is AKA working with them?

AKA: There is an organization of trans sex workers in Ankara which is called Pembe Hayat (Pink Life). Their main aim is to organize a union of trans sex workers. However, because of high trans sex worker murder rates, they are now trying to legalize hate crime laws. This is their top priority now. They continuously make demonstrations and press releases on this topic. We, as anarchists, try to support their actions.

WSA: How do you organize within the context of Turkey's nationalism and its religious conservatism?

AKA: The anarchist movement in Turkey can be organized mainly by basing itself on campuses among university students. Numbers of workers or the unemployed are also connected to the local groups at the universities. Besides this, anti-authoritarian ideals are still an appealing point that attracts individuals who break off from leftist groups. However, it's hard to talk of any gradually growing movement organized in the working class districts. That's why anarchists in Turkey can carry out their activities without direct conflicts with the highly nationalist atmosphere of the Turkey.

WSA: How does state repression affect AKA and the social movements with which you work? How does the Turkish state behave towards anarchists?

AKA: It should be said that Turkey as a modern capitalist state has been in a transformation for the last eight years which has revealed conflict between different segments of the ruling elite. However, state repression has still grown during this period. That's why the state's main aim of the annihilation of the Kurdish rebellion and its potential partners hasn't changed. In this aspect the state and its mechanisms specifically defines its targets. The anarchist movement in Turkey has many organizations, however it is very far from being well organized. Nonetheless, the role of anarchists in anti-militarist activities are closely watched by the state because a possible popular movement based on demands for peace is seen as a real threat to the state and its war against the Kurdish rebellion.

WSA: Are any of your members or comrades currently in prison for political activities?

AKA: During 2010, four anarchist/anti-authoritarians were arrested and jailed for three month periods. Three were charged with participation in the so-called May Day 2009 Riot and assault against the police. The other was charged with participation in an anti-militarist demonstration and carrying a lethal weapon. The latter case had been concluded with his conditional release. The May Day riot trial is still proceeding. Besides this it should be emphasized that there are ongoing trials against anarchists because of anti-militarist activities and migrant solidarity activities.

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