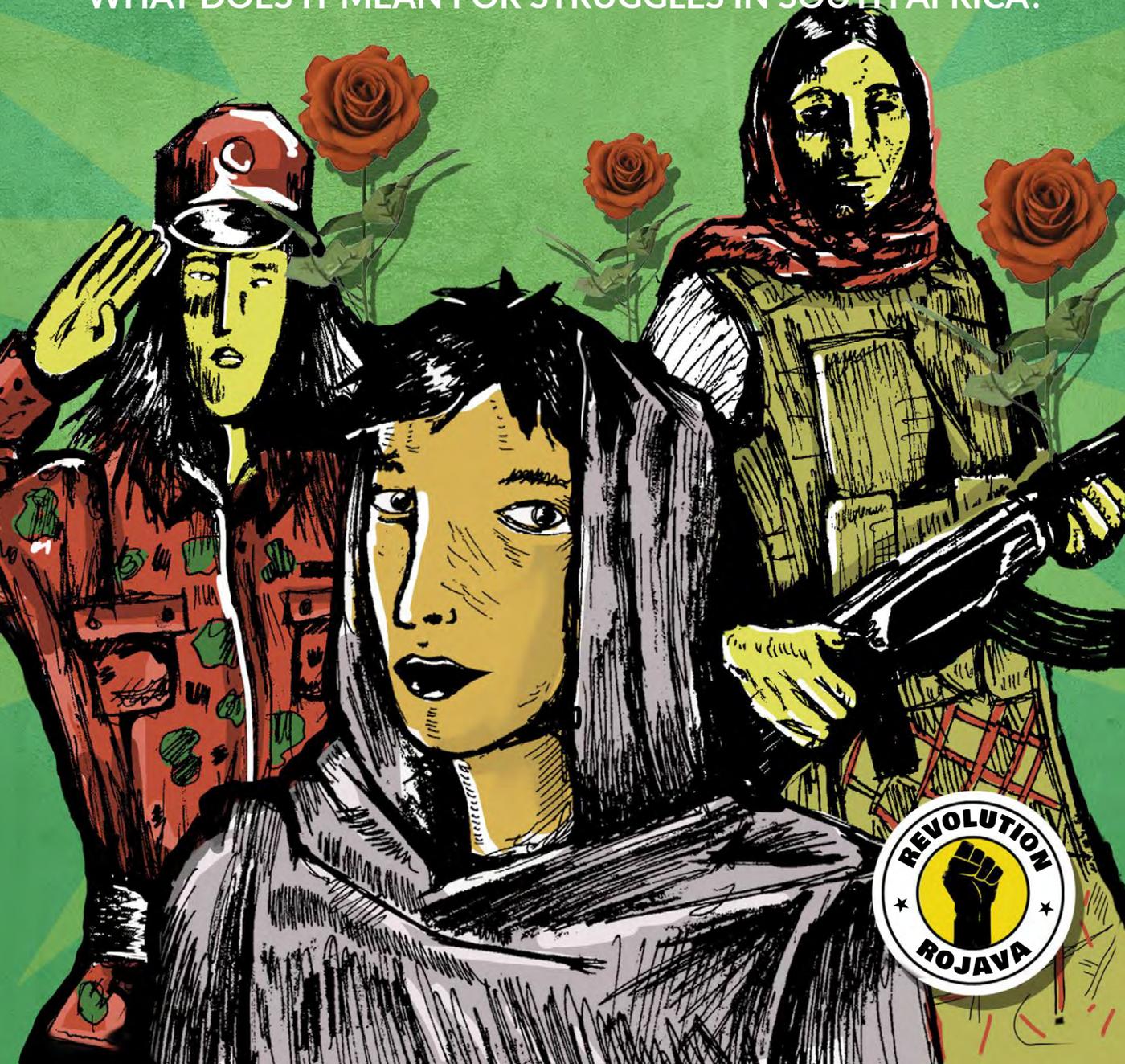


THE RO★JAVA REVOLUTION

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR STRUGGLES IN SOUTH AFRICA?



January 2020

International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG)

Room 14, Community House, 41 Salt River Road, Salt River,
Cape Town, South Africa.

info@ilrig.org.za or +27 (0)21 447 6375

www.ilrigsa.org.za

Design: Design for development

Cover illustration: Mbongeni Fongoqa

Printing: Hansa print

THE REVOLUTION





CHAPTER 1:

Introduction 2

CHAPTER 2:

Background to the Kurdish liberation struggle 12

CHAPTER 3:

Reflection and changes in the Kurdish liberation struggle 18

CHAPTER 4:

The ideas, principles and organisation of democratic confederalism 28

CHAPTER 5:

Revolution in Rojava 36

CHAPTER 6:

Showing us the potential for a better way 46

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION



"We don't need to live in a world

where politicians have power."

In the last few years, most people would have seen or read news stories of how Kurdish fighters in Syria, especially women, have been fighting against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Indeed, at the time of writing (October 2019) news headlines were filled with stories about how the Kurdish people were fighting an invasion by the Turkish state. Very few people, though, would know that in the northern and eastern parts of Syria these same Kurdish fighters are part of a revolution. In fact, the revolution they are taking part in popularly referred to as the Rojava revolution (named after the region it covers in the north and east of Syria), is as progressive and far-reaching as any in history.

“This booklet will look at this ongoing revolution, the type of society it is trying to create, the centrality of women’s liberation and what lessons can be drawn for activists in South Africa”

In Rojava - but also in parts of Turkey, Iran and Iraq - people involved in the revolution are creating an alternative system to hierarchical states, capitalism and patriarchy that they call democratic confederalism. As ILRIG we believe this struggle to create a radical democracy without a state and based on an economy grounded in grassroots socialism can inspire struggles across the world and in South Africa.

What the Rojava revolution shows is that we don’t need to live in a world where politicians have power, where bosses exploit workers, where women are oppressed, and where there is ever increasing poverty and unemployment. It shows that another world is really possible and that we can organise to win it ourselves through building inclusive organisations and through our own democratically controlled actions – political messiahs and vanguards that claim to represent the people and who promise to bring freedom are not needed.



PATRIARCHY

Patriarchy is a societal system in which men hold and exercise power. Women are mostly excluded from holding and exercising power and are systematically oppressed by men. Women are also often paid less than men even when doing the same work under patriarchy. In a patriarchal society, the burden falls largely on women for caring for families and raising children. In the home, husbands are seen as the bosses. Capitalism and state systems are good examples of patriarchal systems and, most religions are also patriarchal.

Nonetheless, working-class women (see definition on page 5) and women who are part of the ruling class (see definition) experience patriarchy differently. It is working-class women that suffer most from patriarchy because they are more vulnerable due to being poor and having little or no resources – making them even more prone to exploitation. A rich woman could face patriarchy in the home by being dominated by her husband and will usually be paid less than a man for doing the same job but she can, however, hire other people (mostly working-class women) to raise her family, cook and clean. A woman from the ruling class can even be a boss to working-class women and working-class men in the workplace.

In this booklet, we will be looking at this revolution and the self-organising that has taken place under democratic confederalism as it has relevance for struggles in South Africa, the region and indeed the world.

This includes:

- the history of the Kurdish struggle and how it has changed over time;
- how democratic confederalism as an idea and way of organising came about;
- the values, principles and vision that inform democratic confederalism and why these are important for all struggles;
- the details of the Rojava revolution and how democratic confederalism has been put in place in the north-east of Syria;
- internal and external threats to the Rojava revolution; and
- lessons that can be drawn from the Rojava revolution for activists in South Africa.

WHY THIS BOOKLET?

In South Africa, we have our own experience of liberation struggles. During the late 1970s and early 1980s **working-class** people, through trade unions and community organisations like civics, fought the apartheid state. Many wanted socialism and a radical form of democracy – a society free of racism and sexism. In the 1980s activists tried to build a people’s power, which included mass organising through street and defence committees that had the potential to create self-governance and overthrow the apartheid state.

By the 1990s, however, and with the negotiated settlement taking centre stage in the struggle to get rid of the apartheid system, the idea and practice of people’s power was gradually dismissed and dismantled. Rather, many people came to believe that the key to winning a more just and equal society now lay with the African National Congress (ANC) gaining state power.



Source: www.no-gods-no-masters.com



Photo by Josue Isai Ramos Figueroa on Unsplash



THE WORKING CLASS

The class system is a system whereby people are divided into categories depending on their social and economic status. It is a hierarchical system. Under capitalism “classes” are defined in terms of their relation and ownership (or non-ownership) to and of the means of production – farms, land, mines, factories and banks – and the resources controlled by the state (government), which are the means of coercion, (for example, armed force, jails, judges) and the systems that manages the people (means of administration such as officials).

The working class is a class: it does not own the means of production and arose because the ruling class (see definition of capitalists and the ruling class on page 6) violently monopolised the means of production in the past. People in the working class have to sell their labour power (ability to work) for wages to survive as they own nothing or

very little and have no capital. The unemployed are part of the working class as all they have is their labour power to sell and when they can’t they are unemployed and act as a reserve labour force.

It is through the labour of the working class that profits are produced. Workers produce all goods in society, but they only get a small percentage of what they produce back in the form of wages (see the definition of exploitation). The rest of what workers produce, is kept by bosses as profits once the products are sold, while some is taken by the state as taxes, including Value Added Tax (VAT). Women of the working class often do unpaid labour that ultimately benefits the ruling class, such as caring for sick family members, feeding their families, cleaning up after their families and raising the next generation of the working class.



Photo Copyright
World Economic
Forum -
Frederik de
Klerk & Nelson
Mandela - World
Economic Forum
Annual Meeting
Davos 1992, CC
BY-SA 2.0

In the lead up to South Africa's 1994 elections, the ANC entered into negotiations with the apartheid state and the ruling class. A deal was eventually made that would see white **capitalists** (a small section of the white population that own the means of production) being allowed to keep their businesses and wealth. In return, the top leaders of the ANC were allowed to take over the state and some were also given shares in big companies.

Through this, many of the leaders of the ANC became part of the **ruling class** in South Africa. This meant that the actual structure of the state was not changed and capitalism was kept in place. With this, the hopes that millions of people had of a more equal, non-racial and non-sexist society were severely undermined.



**RULING CLASS
= CAPITALISTS
AND TOP STATE
OFFICIALS AND
POLITICIANS**

Capitalists are members of a class. They are a small minority within society that own and control most of the means of production – land, banks, financial institutions, farms, mines and factories. They employ wage workers – members of the working class – to work in their factories, mines, banks and farms. However, they only pay workers a small portion of what workers produce in the form of a wage, while keeping the surplus as profit. States

can also act as capitalists when they own the means of production and keep the surplus (profits) workers produce in exchange for paying a small portion back to workers in the form of wages.

Capitalists along with top state officials and politicians form the **ruling class** in our capitalist society and hold power and exercise the rule of their class through the state. Top state officials and politicians are part of the ruling class because they have control over the means of coercion and administration (the army, police and government departments) and can and do use control over the state to accumulate wealth including through corruption. They also live off the labour of the working class through taxes collected by the state.



CAPITALISM

In **capitalism** the main means of production (land, factories and equipment) are owned and controlled by individual capitalists and the state, usually through companies, corporations and state owned enterprises. Products are bought and sold for profit to benefit the elite. Ordinary people are the “**working class**”: those who don’t own but work for wages for those who do own. The working class people who work are “**workers**.” The “**unemployed**” are workers without jobs.

Production under capitalism is, therefore, for profit. Production under capitalism is skewed as a result. For example, under capitalism there is a need for millions of houses for the poor. These are not produced because they are not profitable to build, so a housing shortage exists under capitalism.

The external costs of producing products are externalised though. For example, society as a whole pays for the waste and pollution produced by companies in the form of environmental destruction.

Capitalism is also based on competition. Capitalists compete with one another and even try and drive each other out of business to get an advantage. Workers compete with one another to try and sell their labour power to feed themselves and their families. This competition promotes divisions such as racism and xenophobia in the working class. Ruling classes and the states they control will go to war with each other to get resources such as oil, water, minerals and markets for their

products. More powerful states under capitalism also dominate other states to exploit cheap labour, get minerals and oil cheaply and open new markets – this is called imperialism.

States – made up of the cabinet, government departments, courts, parliament, the army and police – are controlled and run at the top by the ruling class, of which capitalists are part. Today states ensure capitalism’s survival and that the working class remains exploited and oppressed in the interests of capitalists. States are always ruled by a minority elite class and in their interest. For example, feudal states in the past were ruled by and in the interests of nobles and royal families and kept the feudal economy in place by ensuring the oppression of serfs.



Capitalists exploit workers. Artwork is by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)

The ANC, once in power, pushed through a severe form of capitalism called **neoliberalism** (see definition below). This favoured big businesses, but it also helped sections of the ANC get rich through tenders from the state and outsourcing. In fact, through the state the leaders of the ANC became part of the ruling class – along with white capitalists; neoliberalism advanced their common class interests.

Capitalism in South Africa has always been based on the very low wages of black workers. After 1994 this did not change. This is why the legacy of apartheid capitalism still exists and millions of black working-class people remain economically **exploited** and racially oppressed. The year 1994 did not bring liberation for the working class as a whole. In particular, however, the black working class has remained the most exploited and oppressed. After 1994 black working-class women, as they had under apartheid, continued to form the bulk of the unemployed and low wage earners. They also subsidised the profits of big businesses, through unpaid work, like feeding their families, providing care for their families, and raising future generations of workers.



NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is an extreme form of capitalism.

Under capitalism the state always benefits capitalists and rules in their interest. Through struggle over hundreds of years, however, the working class had managed up until the 1970s to win concessions from capitalists and states, such as better wages and working conditions, healthcare, education and services such as water, electricity and housing.

*Under neoliberalism the capitalists and the state have rolled these gains back, due to the balance of class forces being against the working class. The state under neoliberalism opens up services such as health, education, water, transport and electricity to the private sector (capitalists) through **privatisation**, including tenders and outsourcing. The aim of this is to open new areas of profit for*

capitalists and avenues of corruption and material benefit for politicians and top state bureaucrats.

*Under neoliberalism states also change laws to allow companies to move money freely and invest on stock markets anywhere in the world – this is called **financial liberalisation**.*

*States also get rid of taxes on imports and exports to help big capitalists find markets for the goods the companies (through workers) are producing so as to increase profits. This is called **trade liberalisation**.*

Under neoliberalism laws (won through struggle) that protect workers to some degree are changed by states so that wages can be lowered and profits increased. States also increase the money they spend on law enforcement, prisons, the police and the army under neoliberalism. This is used against the working class if they protest.

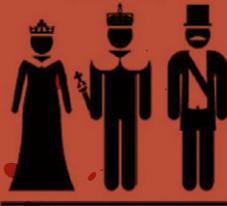
UNDER CAPITALISM, PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED INTO CATEGORIES

**ABAPHIKISI
MBUSO**



CAPITALISM

We Rule You



Siniphethe

Sinenza Izilima



We Fool You

We Shoot At You



Siyanidubula

Sidlela Nina | We Eat For You



We Work For All

Sisebenzela Bonke

We Feed All

Siyabondla Bonke



EXPLOITATION

Capitalism is based on exploitation. Because bosses and/or the state own the factories, banks, mines, etc. the working class have to sell their labour to the capitalist bosses for a wage. The bosses are interested in squeezing as much work out of workers for as little wages as possible so that he/she can maintain high profits. The more wages workers get, the less profit the bosses make.

As a rule, workers never get the full value of their labour back in wages, and bosses keep the rest as

profits. So a worker can make thousands of shoes in a week, which can be sold by a boss for R5 000, for example, but the worker will only get a wage of maybe R900 – the boss keeps the rest of the money for himself. This is what is called exploitation. So workers produce everything, but the bosses – because of laws, such as property rights – get to keep all these products and sell them, and then workers are only given a small portion back of what they produced in the form of a wage.

For some activists, the struggle for liberation in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s was also for the liberation of women and for women to break free of patriarchal social relations. After 1994, this became a distant dream. Gender relations were not fundamentally changed after 1994. Problems such as gender-based violence remain as widespread as under apartheid. The government under the ANC, far from breaking away from patriarchal relations has strengthened them through amongst many things aligning with 'traditional' leaders in the former homelands and seeking to increase the power of these leaders who are often conservative. The ANC is doing this to ensure the support and votes of traditional leaders.

The decisions that were taken in the 1990s, therefore, have meant that full freedom has not been achieved. This was not inevitable though – it related rather to the choices that were made,

including the ANC entering into state power, and the path of capitalist neoliberalism that was chosen.

The important thing about the Rojava revolution is that it shows that another path can be followed. As we will interrogate in this booklet, it shows a structured, direct democracy, but without the state, can be created, and an economic system that begins to move beyond capitalism can be built. It also shows how the dominant relations of patriarchy can be broken and how the liberation of women can happen in practice. Through this, it shows how via personal and collective change, combined with organising and mobilisation, activists and ordinary people can create a society of genuine freedom, equality, non-racism and non-sexism – in other words something we are still struggling for in South Africa.



CHAPTER 2:

THE BACKGROUND TO THE KURDISH LIBERATION STRUGGLE



"Kurdish subsistence farmers were

consequently forced to abandon the land."

The Rojava revolution has its beginnings in the struggle for national liberation by the Kurdish people in the Middle East. An estimated 40 million Kurdish people live in four states in the Middle East: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. For hundreds of years, the Kurdish people have been oppressed and exploited. Up until 1918, they lived under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

THE KURDISH PEOPLE AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Ottoman Empire lasted from 1299 to 1922. The centre of power was in modern-day Turkey, but the Ottoman Empire at its height stretched across the Middle East and North Africa. The Ottoman Empire was a monarchy, in which the ruling class was made up of nobility and royalty. This ruling class controlled the economy, based around agriculture and trade, and lived off the taxes and tribute that was charged to the majority of people who were peasants or serfs. The economy and social relations were largely **feudalistic**.

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War 1 against the Allies — Britain, France, Russia and later the United States of America (USA). This war was a war between the biggest imperialist powers on behalf of their ruling classes to try and gain greater control of other resources and territory in the Middle East and Europe. This war was, therefore, driven by the competition that is central to capitalism. In 1918, the Allies defeated the Ottoman Empire. As part of the defeat, Britain and France broke up the Ottoman Empire and a number of new states like Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon were created through deals between the Allies and local elites.

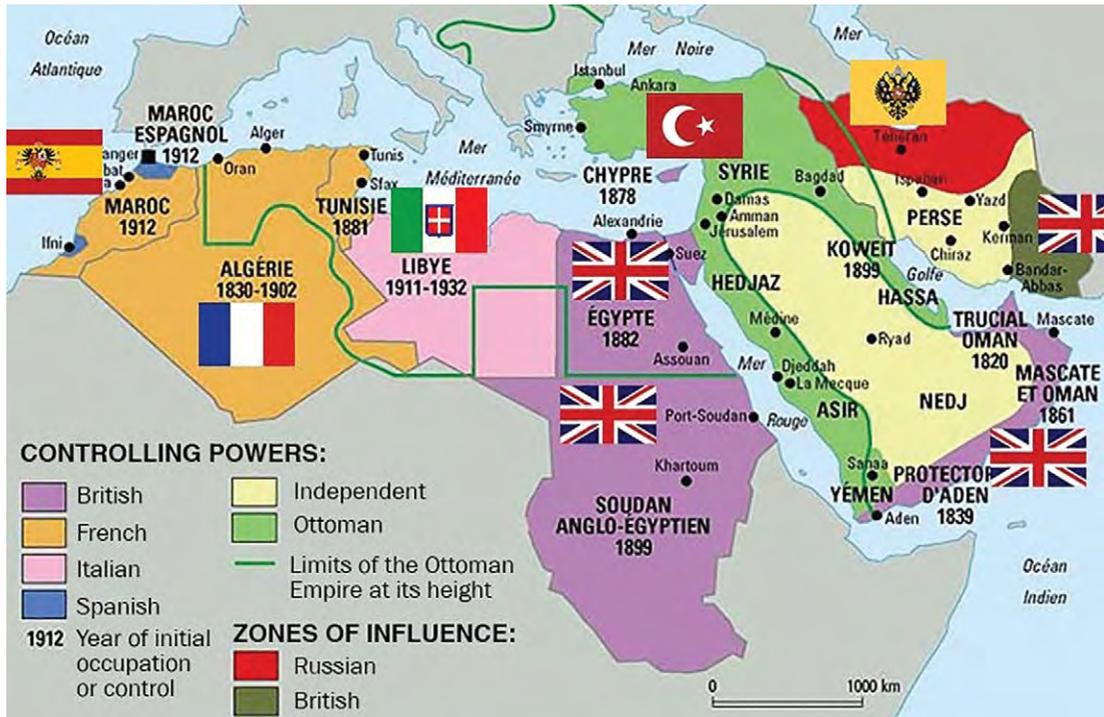
The Kurdish people found themselves spread across four states after World War 1: Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. At first, most Kurds hoped that they would be given their own state by the Allies after this war but this did not happen. The Kurdish people were politically betrayed by the Allies.



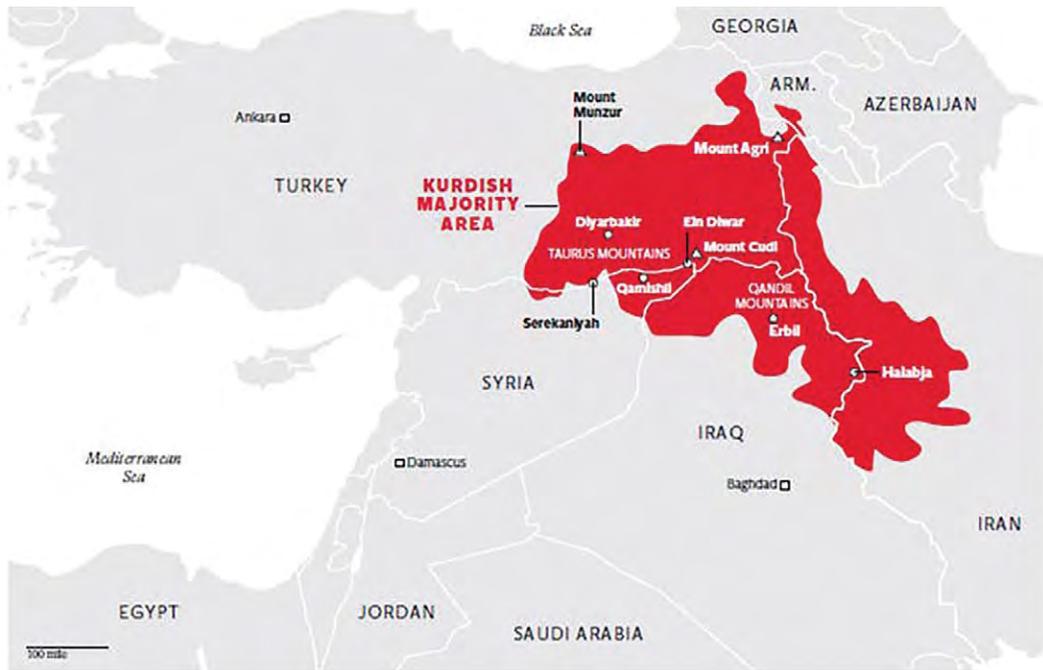
FEUDALISM AND SERFDOM

Feudalism is based on serfdom. This is a system of semi-slavery, where a peasant is forced to pay rent to the landlord, but cannot leave the land on which he or she lives. "Peasants" are small family farmers who rely on family labour and pay rent and taxes to elites. The elites are landowners from "noble" families, and land moves through

inheritance: it can't be sold. Under feudalism, peasants are inherited with that land, and on that land, are subject to the absolute rule of the landlord — these peasants are called serfs, which means they are semi-slaves. Serfdom generally means landlords carry out the law on their lands, including punishments and executions.



The breaking up of the Ottoman Empire. Source: www.reddit.org



Kurdish areas. Source: www.wikicommons

In the four countries the Kurdish population found themselves in they were discriminated against on the basis of their language and ethnicity.

KURDISH OPPRESSION AND ETHNIC CLEANSING IN TURKEY

The Kurdish people in Turkey have faced severe oppression since the founding of the Turkish state in 1922. The Turkish state since then has seen itself as a state of ethnic Turks. It even denies the existence of the 17 million Kurdish people who live in Turkey – mostly in the south of Turkey.

Up until today, the Kurdish language is banned in schools and government institutions. In fact, the use of Kurdish is also forbidden privately and the word “Kurds” has even been banned in the past. Throughout its history, the Turkish state has often ethnically cleansed Kurdish villages, towns and neighbourhoods and there have been many massacres. By the mid-1990s more than 3000 villages had been wiped from the map, and according to the Turkish state’s official figures 378 335 Kurdish villagers had been displaced and left homeless. The most recent time that villages have been bulldozed has been under the current president of Turkey, the far right-winger, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In 2015, 2018 and 2019 under his orders the Turkish military attacked and destroyed hundreds of Kurdish neighbourhoods.

Most of the Kurdish population have been a source of cheap labour for capitalists in Turkey. The state oppression they have historically faced – much like the black working-class population in South Africa – has created a situation where Kurdish people form a pool of cheap labour for the benefit of local capitalists.

The Turkish state has deliberately underdeveloped Kurdish areas, and the average per capita income of Kurds is a quarter that of ethnic Turks. Half of the houses in the Kurdish areas of Turkey lack basic infrastructure such as electricity, water and sanitation. Many Kurds consequently are low paid migrant workers in Turkey’s main cities such as Istanbul.

The Turkish state also implemented large-scale projects for the benefit of capitalists in the Kurdish areas of Turkey. Hundreds of licenses to undertake mining and fracking were given to corporations in the Kurdish areas. These companies with the help of the state drove Kurdish people off the land and destroyed the environment as a by-product of mining and fracking.

Many rivers were also dammed in the Kurdish areas of Turkey to supply water to these mining and fracking companies. In the process rivers which were used by Kurdish people to irrigate subsistence farms began to dry up. Kurdish subsistence farmers were consequently forced to abandon the land and move to cities as cheap labourers. The ecology of the Kurdish areas was also damaged by dam construction projects.



Protests by Kurdish community. Photo by www.socialistparty.org.uk

KURDISH OPPRESSION IN SYRIA

Most of the Kurdish people in Syria live in the northeastern part of that country. As in Turkey, Kurdish people in Syria up until the Rojava revolution had faced state oppression. Kurdish languages were banned in schools and in 1962, the state even stripped hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people of their Syrian citizenship and they were denied the right to work, despite their families having lived in Syria for generations. They could not own any property, they could not access any education nor could they even marry.

In the north of Syria, the state – in particular under the al-Assad regimes – expropriated the land of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people. The state aimed to turn the Kurdish population into a landless source of cheap labour (which has parallels in how the colonial and apartheid states dispossessed black people in South Africa of their land to turn them into a source of cheap labour). This land was either handed over to Syrian capitalists or became state-owned plantations. Arab-speaking Syrians were also brought into the area by the state. Most Kurds under this regime earned a living through either being farm labourers or migrant workers – including domestic workers – in the main cities in Syria, such as Damascus.

The introduction of large-scale plantations by the state also caused ecological destruction as monocropping – of wheat – replaced biodiversity. Along with this, oil production by the state also caused environmental damage driving more Kurdish people into the cities as low-paid workers.

KURDISH GENOCIDE IN IRAQ

Most of the Kurdish population in Iraq live in the northwestern part of the country. Kurdish people in Iraq also have suffered oppression. Between 1986 and 1989, the Iraqi state under the late dictator Saddam Hussein committed genocide against the Kurdish people.

Many Kurdish villages were destroyed and between 50 000 and 180 000 Kurdish people were killed.

At a place called Halabja, the Iraqi military used mustard gas against Kurds and in the process thousands of people died. After the USA invasion of Iraq (since 2003), the Kurdish areas in Iraq have been a self-governing province. This area has been under the control of a Kurdish right-wing nationalist party, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which has implemented neoliberal policies that favour the leadership of the party.

KURDISH OPPRESSION IN IRAN

The Iranian state has also historically oppressed the Kurds. Kurdish people were and are excluded from being employed by the state. As in Turkey and historically Syria, Kurdish languages are prohibited in schools. Kurdish activists who have protested against the oppression of the Kurds by the Iranian state have often faced persecution and arrest. Most of the Kurdish population in Iran live in the northwestern part of the country.

KURDISH WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

Kurdish women have not only faced oppression due to their ethnicity, but also their gender.

Historically, within Kurdish society women were trapped in patriarchal domination with their role being confined to the home and raising children. In this context, domestic violence was widespread.

Forced marriage was common and wealthy men often took more than one wife. Women who had been raped were sometimes subjected to so-called honour killings by their families. Such practices still take place in parts of Turkey, Iran and Iraq today and many Kurdish women are still exploited and oppressed.

CHAPTER 3:

REFLECTION AND CHANGES IN THE KURDISH LIBERATION STRUGGLE



"States are central to capitalism

and keeping it in place."

As a result of the oppression, ethnic cleansing and genocide they have faced, the Kurdish people began a struggle for liberation in Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. A number of parties emerged during this struggle.

In 1949, for example, the KDP was formed in Iraq to try and pressurise for Kurdish independence and a state of their own. Throughout its history, it has been controlled by the Barzani family. It is far from a progressive party. Rather it is a very hierarchical party and it is tribalistic, nationalistic and pro-capitalist. In the 1960s, it began a guerrilla war against the Iraqi state. Its stronghold continues today to be in Iraq and since the United State's invasion of the country in 2003, it has ruled over a part of the country through its own state at a provincial level.

THE KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY (PKK)

In 1979 the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was formed. It had members in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. The main strongholds of the party, however, were in Turkey and Syria. On its founding, the PKK declared itself a Marxist-Leninist Party (broadly influenced by Stalinist politics). It was very much a top-down party with the Central Committee having power. It was, therefore, a hierarchical and centralised party, with little or no internal democracy. Most of the leadership were men even though a majority of the members were women.

The aim of the PKK when it was founded was to create a Kurdish workers' state along the lines of the Soviet Union across the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. From the start, it claimed to be anti-capitalist and pro-poor. It said that in the workers' state it wanted to create, the means of production would be **nationalised** and that the economy would be planned by the state and state officials to ensure that what was needed was produced. Under this system, the PKK as the vanguard party would head the state to ensure that the revolution did not deviate from its objectives of creating a so-called socialist state.



NATIONALISATION

Nationalisation happens when a state takes over a private company and private land and resources, which it then owns, controls and manages. Many people on the left believe that nationalisation is a progressive step. They believe that through nationalisation, working conditions can be improved, the income of the state increased, and a more equal economy achieved through state ownership and management.

Historically, however, nationalisation has not proven on the whole to be progressive. The reason for this is because states are not neutral nor are they pro-working class. States are, and always have been, controlled by a minority of privileged people – today that is capitalists and top state officials. As such states are top-down structures through which a few command –

the working class as a whole can never control and run a state – it is designed for a minority to rule. States, in fact, protect the interest of the ruling class against the working class.

The people that head up the state are part of the ruling class – they govern, command, exploit and oppress the working class. In fact, the state is also a major economic player and is also a capitalist. State-owned – in other words nationalised – companies like Eskom and Transnet exploit workers and are run for the benefit of the ruling class. As an example, if a state nationalises mines or factories it means that the state owns these and top state officials control them – in other words, they are the bosses, not the working class. Nationalisation means assets being transferred from one section of the ruling class – capitalists – to another section of the ruling class – top state officials. Nationalisation does not equal socialism or workers' democracy or workers' self-management.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the PKK's tactics often involved assassinations and bombings. Along with targeting the Turkish military and politicians, they also targeted Kurdish capitalists who were exploiting workers and peasants.

Many Kurdish capitalists supported and collaborated with the Turkish state and were seen as collaborators in the oppression of the Kurdish working class.

The aim of the assassinations and bombings were to try and encourage a mass uprising by the Kurdish working class against the Turkish state and local Kurdish capitalists. The idea of this armed struggle was to show that the Turkish ruling class and Kurdish capitalists were vulnerable, which the PKK believed would give the Kurdish working class and peasants the confidence to rebel.

By the mid-1990s, the PKK had become the central and leading force in the liberation struggles of the Kurdish people and over-shadowed parties like the KDP.

By the early 1980s, the PKK had established bases and camps in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Members of the PKK underwent military training in these bases and camps. Some were also trained by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). In 1984 the PKK launched a guerrilla war against the Turkish state. This war has been brutal with the PKK having lost over 34 000 fighters, while over 8 200 Turkish soldiers have been killed.

Despite this, the PKK always managed to attract women activists and fighters to the organisation. Joining the PKK offered women an escape route from patriarchal families and the threat of forced marriage. In 1993, the PKK established its own women's army known as the Union of Free Women of Kurdistan (YAJK) with its own headquarters.





Militia of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Photo by Ceerwan Aziz. Source: www.workers.org

THE PKK ABANDONS MARXIST-LENINISM

By the late 1990s members of the PKK began to critically reflect on the politics, practices, strategies and tactics of the organisation. As part of this, thousands of members discussed and debated the principles, values, forms of organising and ideology of the PKK.

The reason for this is that the guerrilla war was at a stalemate and the PKK had failed to fully mobilise the Kurdish working class. The Soviet Union had also collapsed, which fed into the PKK reflecting on their own politics and practices.

As part of this, members of the PKK began by looking back at history and critically analysing past revolutions, such as the Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutions. They debated how the revolutions unfolded, why they went wrong and what happened to the experiments that said they wanted socialism, but in the end failed, in different ways, to live up to the initial ideas and promises.

When the PKK activists looked at the history of the Soviet Union they saw that in 1917 workers and peasants set up councils (soviets) to challenge the tsarist state and undertake two revolutions. To begin with, because the Communist Party supported the workers it was extremely popular and came to be the main force and majority in most soviets. In October 1917, the Communist Party spearheaded a second revolution in Russia and with the support of the majority of soviets dissolved the parliament. The Communist Party said all power must be given to the soviets.



Meeting of the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Source: www.libcom.org 1917.

A few days later a conference of all of the soviets in Russia was held to discuss how to take the revolution forward and how society should be governed. A vote was held amongst all the representatives attending. A majority vote set up a cabinet and executive called the Council of People's Commissars as the head of a new government.

The vast majority of representatives voted onto the executive were members of the Communist Party. The executive was handed power and the representatives of it were given decision-making powers — they were, therefore, representatives like ministers in a state and not mandated delegates. The executive was also tasked with overseeing what remained of the tsarist state to supposedly fundamentally transform it and to guide the revolution.

The executive, headed by Vladimir Lenin, had a great deal of power because they were representatives that had been given decision-making powers. As such, the Russian state was not done away with but rather the Communist Party came to oversee and run it as was also the case with the soviets — through an executive structure called the Council of People's Commissars.

For various reasons, including the repression of the Putilov strikes (see explanation below) and attacking anarchist sections of the working class or those from other parties that were becoming a majority amongst workers, the Communist Party began losing majority support in most of the soviets. When this happened, they used their control of the executive and the rest of the state, including political police, to crush the elections in soviets that they were losing. By the end of 1918, the executive of the state held power and the soviets had become appendages of the state due to the fact that soviet elections were manipulated or stopped if the Communist Party thought they would lose. The end result was that the soviets were incorporated into the state.

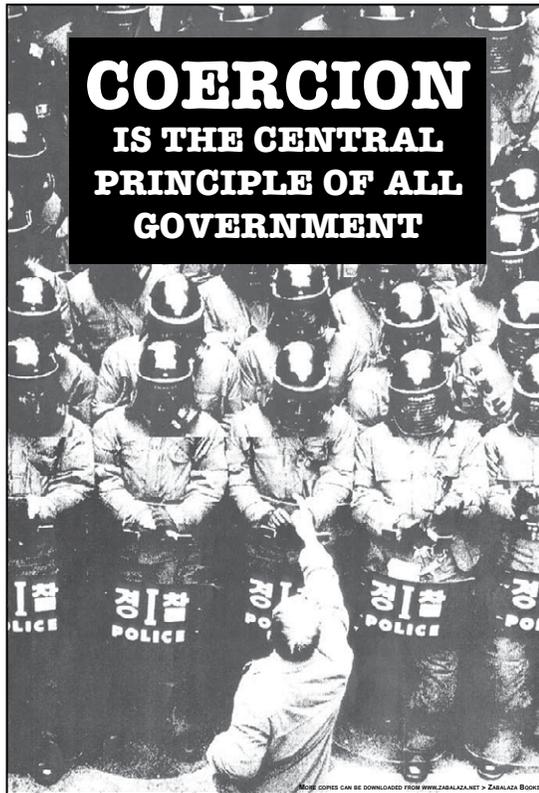
A majority within the PKK concluded that the main reason these past revolutions had failed is that they did not put an end to the structure of the state.

Rather, Communist Parties came to head the state, declared themselves as the only legal political organisation, used the state to crush opponents (even progressive ones) and through this the leaders of these parties became rulers and a new elite within society. Most PKK members came to hold the view that in these states figures such as Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Castro and Mao and those loyal to them held real power; not the majority of people.

As part of internal debates, PKK activists looked at the nationalised industries in the Soviet Union, China and Cuba. They saw that regardless, workers had remained exploited. Workplaces were still not democratically run and were headed by managers appointed by the state. State central planning of the economy also meant the managers carried out the plan and ordered workers how to do it. If workers did not perform to their liking, the state managers punished them. This was so even though the Soviet Union claimed to be a workers' state.

In the Soviet Union and China politicians and managers also received better wages than workers. They received privileges such as big houses and cars, while workers were often forced to live in poor accommodation. These managers and politicians formed an elite minority class that ruled, had power over the state and the means of production and exploited and lived off the labour of workers.

PKK activists also learned that in states such as the Soviet Union and China, strikes were brutally put down. For example, in 1919 at the Putilov factory (where in 1917, workers helped start the February Revolution) in the Soviet Union, workers went out on strike to demand workers' democracy in the soviets, freedom of speech, and the right to organise and assemble. The strike soon spread, so the Communist Party sent in the state political police to break it. Show trials of striking workers were held, pointing towards a path Stalinism would later take on a much larger scale. Over 200 workers were executed because they went on strike to uphold the original goals of the revolution.



Artwork by Griffin .Source: www.zabalaza.org

Through analysis and debate, most PKK members came to understand that all states, whether or not claiming to be revolutionary, were hierarchical. Even if those that headed them had the best intentions at first, after becoming rulers they eventually ended up, to varying degrees, sidelining, oppressing and exploiting the majority of people because the state's top-down structure meant keeping those leaders truly accountable was impossible.

Even more than this, by looking at the history of how and when states were first formed and who historically controlled them, and for what purposes, many within the PKK came to the conclusion that states were always patriarchal.

What they found is that states first arose in societies where a minority became an elite ruling class, but also importantly, in ones in which men began oppressing women and exploiting their labour. In fact, for most of human history there

were no such things as nation states — they only came about in more recent human history where minorities ruled over, oppressed and exploited the vast majority. As such the role and main function of states, besides controlling a specific geographical territory, was and is to enforce the institutionalised rule of a minority privileged class. In today's world, this means states are central to capitalism and keeping it in place.

Many within the PKK argued that states are, therefore, not natural institutions; they were rather created by elites to rule over a majority. In fact, they pointed out that this can be seen in the laws that states uphold. Throughout history, they have, through the law, upheld private property and property owned by the state. States have also always claimed an institutionalised monopoly over violence and deployed violence against those that questioned the rule of the elite minority or those that questioned the state. Through education, propaganda, and nationalist ideology states were and have been able to get the majority of people to buy into their existence and accept the rule of an elite minority. Indeed, due to their very structures — which centralised power — states could not escape or be changed to shift away from their original purpose: becoming the central vehicle for an elite to hold power and rule over society.

THE PKK, REVOLUTION AND LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM

As part of reflecting on their ideological orientation, activists in the PKK began to look at other forms of socialism, beyond those informed by various interpretations of Marxism-Leninism. As such, the PKK did not abandon its anti-capitalism but looked for a better more democratic way to try and bring about socialism.

One historical event that activists in the PKK looked at was the experience of [anarcho-syndicalism](#) and [anarchist-communism](#) during the Spanish Revolution of 1936. In 1936 anarchists in Spain (mostly, union activists who believed there should be socialism without a state, and that this socialism should be based on direct democracy of the working class in revolutionary unions and community organisations running society) attempted a revolution.

The anarchists implemented direct democracy through workers taking over farms, mines, factories and socialising them – meaning the factories and mines belonged to the workers and their democratic structures and organisations, not the state. The factories, mines, banks and farms were run democratically by the workers and produced to meet the needs of ordinary people, not to make profits.

There soon emerged a civil war with fascists, but the anarchists made a massive mistake and co-operated with the state, which was headed by Socialists and the Communist Party. Two of the leaders of the anarchist movement even became ministers in the state in 1937. The anarchists who entered the state were representatives and held decision-making power and themselves became part of an elite and began to see things from the side of the state. This meant they abandoned their revolutionary anarchist principles in the name of unity against the fascists.

In May 1937, the Communist Party and socialist headed state's military forces attacked the working class anarchist stronghold of Barcelona to try and end the rival power of working-class structures and anarchist unions challenge to the state. In Spain, it was the middle classes that influenced the Communist Party and they wanted the anarchist-led revolution crushed, just as the fascists did.

The anarchist-aligned workers in Barcelona defeated the attacks on this city, but were called on by the anarchist leadership in the state to lay down their weapons and focus rather on the struggle against the fascists even though this meant the working class would lose the power they had. They did so, and the Communist and Socialist led state – with the support of the two anarchists in the state – effectively crushed the revolution soon afterwards by ending the worker collectives and workers' control over farms, factories and mines. However, in 1938, the Communist Party and socialist-led state was defeated by the fascists.

The PKK studied this history and saw that as soon as anarchists accepted the state and no longer struggled to end it, the revolution was defeated. In turn, this reinforced their conclusion that all states were inherently counter-revolutionary because of their structure and purpose. However, the PKK chose to take some elements, but not all, of the politics, principles and values of the anarchists on board, such as a commitment to anti-statism, anti-capitalism and direct democracy.



ANARCHIST-COMMUNISM AND ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

Anarchist-communism is a form of communism that aims to get rid of class rule, states, capitalism, imperialism, racism and sexism through revolution by the working class. It envisions a society based on direct democracy in which people run society collectively through community and worker councils. These would then be federated together at a local level, regionally and internationally. Community councils would send mandated and recallable delegates to such structures, which would not have decision-making powers. Rather, they would have to receive mandates from community councils. This would replace the need for states.

The revolution would be defended by a democratic militia made up of volunteers. There would be no such things as political parties or representative democracy, which is a hierarchical way of organising a society that gives power to representatives creating a bureaucracy.

On the economic front, the idea would be that all wealth and the means of production would be socialised. In other words, it would belong to the working class as a whole through the democratic structures and organisations of the class. Workplaces would be run based on direct democracy with all workers having a vote in their workplaces, being run through worker councils and mass meetings. To co-ordinate production, mandated delegates would be sent to local, regional, national and even international councils. Workplace councils would also be linked to community councils ensuring democracy within the economy. Production would be based on democratically meeting people's needs.

A key to anarchist communism is that those deciding on issues are the people directly impacted on by those decisions and issues. For example, a community through a community council may decide to use a certain area to build a park for children. The city-wide council cannot over-ride that decision if it is not directly impacted on by it. If there is a good reason for other community councils to object to the park, then they can. For example, if a community plans to knock down a power station supplying electricity to other communities, these communities through delegates in the city-wide council can object and over-ride the decision to build a park because they are impacted by that decision if a power station supplying them with electricity would be knocked down in the process. This is different to a state system, where the state plans and decides what will be built and imposes it on communities.

Anarcho-syndicalism is a revolutionary trade unionism that fights capitalism and the state today, but has the long-term goal of achieving a revolution and implementing anarchist-communism. In the past, from the 1880s to the 1930s, the biggest trade unions in countries such as Mexico, Spain, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Egypt, Bolivia and Uruguay were anarcho-syndicalist unions. The first union that recruited black workers in South Africa, the Industrial Workers of Africa, in the 1910s, was an anarcho-syndicalist union. Anarcho-syndicalist unions still exist in countries such as Spain, Sweden, Brazil and Uruguay, but they are much smaller than in the past. The reasons for this have to do with the extreme state repression these unions were subjected to and the reality that many working class formations adopted Leninism and later

Stalinism in the belief they could copy the example of the Soviet Union.

Anarcho-syndicalist unions differ from other unions in many ways. Most have no paid officials, no paid organisers nor shop stewards. They, therefore, don't have a paid bureaucracy. Rather they are based on mass meeting and worker councils in the workplace. All workers that are members of such unions through the councils fight for better working conditions and higher wages directly. The councils in a union then federate across industries. For example, all farmworkers in an anarchist union would be federated together. They would send mandated, rotating and recallable delegates to co-ordinating structures, councils and congresses. But all workers in an anarchist union are also federated together in councils locally in neighbourhoods, at a city-wide level and in a federation at a national level.

Political education forms a key part of anarcho-syndicalist unions who also involve community members through social centres in communities.



Poster of the anarchist-syndicalist union, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, at the outbreak of the Spanish Revolution in 1936.

Source: www.libcom.org

Further, they take up community struggles, including rent boycotts because they are rooted in communities. Part of the political education also involves the idea of preparing members for worker self-management: that is, preparing workers to democratically take over and run workplaces as part of a revolution in the future.

The PKK also became influenced by the ideas of an American libertarian socialist and ecologist called Murray Bookchin. He proposed that as part of changing society, capitalism and the state needed to be replaced by community assemblies and councils that were federated together from a municipal to a global level. Every municipality would be based on direct democracy, and although federated, they would have autonomy over decisions that directly impacted on them. On the economic front, Bookchin proposed a worker and community self-managed economy to meet people's needs in an ecologically sustainable way.

As a result, in 2005 the PKK gave up being a vanguard party, and changed their politics and structures. They decided rather to build a mass movement, based on principles of equality, non-hierarchy, direct democracy, federated struggles and mutual aid. Importantly, they also adopted feminism and the idea that the liberation of women should not only be in the future but now.

This feminism became a central pillar of their politics, which saw a mass movement based on feminism as being a counter-power that could eventually replace the state and capitalism. They called this new form of politics and organising democratic confederalism.

CHAPTER 4:

THE IDEAS, PRINCIPLES & ORGANISING OF DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM



*“The councils are a form of organising that is
a rejection of the state at a local level.”*

Through debate and discussion, a majority of activists in the PKK adopted a vision and way of organising in 2005 called democratic confederalism. Central to the vision and organising of democratic confederalism is the rejection of all states, capitalism and patriarchy and their replacement with a new way of self-organising the whole of society centred on direct democracy, women's liberation, an end to class rule, and democratic production to meet people's needs.

The activists involved in developing democratic confederalism did not just want a new society in the future after the revolution, they wanted to begin to build the beginnings of such a society now – one that could eventually replace the state and capitalism, but that would begin building towards this in the present.

The idea behind democratic confederalism is for democracy to extend into all areas of society and for power to lie at the base of society with the working class so that the 'need' for bosses, state politicians, the army or the police is eroded and eventually ended. In rejecting the state, democratic confederalism puts forward an alternative in terms of how society could be run without a state through **direct democracy**. Central to this is the idea of creating neighbourhood councils and linking these into a confederation.



DIRECT DEMOCRACY VS REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Direct democracy is a form of participatory democracy which aims to equalise power relations and have the broadest possible number of people involved in decision-making over aspects of their own lives within communities and workplaces. Decisions are made by everyone through mass meetings and voting. Examples of direct democracy can be found in some community movements and some revolutionary or anarcho-syndicalist trade unions. If co-ordination is needed, mandated, recallable and rotating delegates are sent to co-ordinating structures. As they are mandated and recallable, the delegates in co-ordinating structures take instructions from members at the base and are accountable to them.

Representative democracy is the central form of organising in most political parties, trade unions, community movements and in parliament. It involves people voting for a representative into leadership positions or into parliament to make decisions on behalf of people or the membership. Power, therefore, lies with the representative during his or her time in 'office' and is handed to them by people or membership until the next vote. This is a very limited form of democracy and is very different to direct democracy.

To build this, the activists of the PKK began self-organising a mass movement in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and parts of Iran. Activists from the PKK, and their sister party in Syria the Democratic Union Party (PYD), began encouraging people in Kurdish areas to set up neighbourhood councils where they could organise and begin to take charge of how to run their lives locally to meet their needs, such as housing, water, electricity and education. This saw them visiting houses, mobilising people, and promoting the idea that if people wanted to change their lives they had to organise locally and build neighbourhood councils.

Through these efforts, hundreds of neighbourhood councils in Kurdish working-class areas in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq were set up. These councils are a movement, through which people mobilise to demand and struggle for Kurdish freedom, including the right to housing, services and jobs. But they are also more than this, they are the structures through which people can take power and build a new society from the ground up. This practice of building the shell of a new society within the current one is known as **pre-figurative politics**.

HOW THE COUNCILS WORK

The neighbourhood councils under democratic confederalism work in a very specific way to make sure power stays with everyone at the base. All people at a neighbourhood level are welcome to participate in the neighbourhood councils, there are no restrictions on who participates and the agendas of all meetings are collectively decided. Through these councils for example, people might decide how to undertake a protest action, including where and when. But they are also more than this.

In the neighbourhood councils all the people involved decide on what should be done around education, services, needs, the law and the economy in their neighbourhood. In these meetings everyone has a right to speak and through debate, decisions are collectively made through voting on positions by the people affected. Plans around the decisions are carried out and the councils contest the resources of the state locally and try to bring them under democratic control.

This often brings the councils into confrontation with the state, especially at a local level in Turkey. The councils, therefore, also work out defensive strategies through which people protect themselves against attacks from the state – which can even include organising a people's militia.

The idea of the councils is to begin to challenge the need for a state at a local level. With people deciding how to run things collectively at the local level, the need and power of a centralised state to intervene is challenged.

The councils are a form of organising that rejects the state at a local level, although they do not ignore the fact that the state has power – they rather challenge that power.

Each council is also responsible for safety and security in neighbourhoods. This means a rejection of the idea of a police force, which is one of the pillars of state power. The councils are also responsible for dispensing justice. This is done through democratic hearings and based on the idea of restorative justice as opposed to punishment.



PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

Prefigurative politics are ways of organising that aim to reflect the future society that is being fought for.

For example, if we want to create a society of direct democracy where the working class has power, then we need to build organisations today based on direct democracy and working class control. These organisations could also be used after the revolution to run a society based on direct democracy.

So the idea of prefigurative politics is we build organisations that already embrace the values, principles, ethics and practices that we want to have everywhere – and not just in our organisations – after the revolution. So you begin today to make the building blocks of the new society you want in the future after a social revolution. In other words, laying the foundations for creating a better world starts with how you organise today and these organisations are training grounds to run all of society democratically after a revolution.

Councils are, therefore, seen as the key structures of the revolution for creating a society without the state and capitalism, in which face-to-face democracy takes place. They are also, importantly, not linked to parties, but rather local structures of people-to-people democracy. This vision of creating councils in which people have direct control of their daily lives through direct democracy has some parallels with the vision of people's power and street committees in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s.

The neighbourhood councils also undertake mass political self-education. People participating in the councils undertake self-education on feminism; the principles and organising of democratic confederalism; the roots of the state system and how it is linked to patriarchy and class rule; and why capitalism is exploitative and oppressive, especially towards working-class women.

Under the organising model of democratic confederalism, the neighbourhood councils then send elected and recallable delegates to city-wide or village councils. They, in turn, send delegates to provincial, national and even international assemblies. So the idea is for all the councils to be federated together on a larger scale through such structures.

The idea of democratic confederalism is for real power to lie with all neighbourhood councils. Activists in the PKK felt this would prevent the emergence of an elite since direct democracy requires that there are no hierarchies given that mandated recallable delegates are always subject to the will of the neighbourhood councils which are from the base of the society.

The position of mandated delegates is also not permanent but rotatable. They receive no pay or special benefits from being a delegate; being a mandated delegate is, therefore, not a job.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND WOMEN'S ORGANISING

Democratic confederalism sees self-organisation as the key to achieving freedom. It encourages everyone to self-organise. As a key part of this, women councils are vital. Women's councils are self-organised structures of women that organise in communities and which seek to improve women's lives at a local level.

To do this, the aims are to combat patriarchy, gender-based violence, improve women's education, promote women's activism and build women's leadership. Women's councils also run what are called academies that are central to furthering political education amongst women.

The women's councils are also federated together into city-wide assemblies through mandated and recallable delegates.

The youth is also seen as central to democratic confederalism and also organise their own councils that are federated together.

They also further the more specific struggles of the youth.

“The aims are to combat patriarchy, gender-based violence, improve women's education, promote women's activism and build women's leadership.”

THERE WILL BE NO WOMENS
LIBERATION WITHOUT REVOLUTION

THERE WILL BE NO REVOLUTION
WITHOUT WOMENS LIBERATION



DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND THE COMMUNAL ECONOMY

On the economic front, democratic confederalism aims to establish an economy based on meeting people's needs, not profits. Central to this is the establishment and spread of cooperatives linked to neighbourhood councils. The development of these co-operatives in Turkey, Iran and Iraq has been slow (although as will be shown in the next chapter, in northern Syria the story is very different). This sort of economy based on need has been called communalism.

A key part of communalism is also to ensure that the economy is ecologically sustainable. Under capitalism, the ecology is seen as a resource to be exploited for profits. Communalism, however, aims to allow for the ecology to recover and not be a source of exploitation for profits. Rather communalism realises that it is only through the ecology that people's needs for housing and water can be met and life itself sustained. So the communal economy aims to be ecologically sustainable, it aims to reduce waste, and it aims ensure the natural world is not indiscriminately exploited. Democratic confederalism views people as part of the ecology and not above it – so the ecology is not something to be exploited but preserved so people's needs can be met as part of it.



Source: www.makerojavegreenagain.org

NOT JUST A STRUGGLE OF THE KURDS

Democratic confederalism was and is seen as a struggle not just of the Kurds, but all people in the Middle East and the world. As part of this inclusiveness, Syrian, Arab and Turkish people are welcomed into the struggle and have started to participate in the councils. Two key pillars of democratic confederalism are therefore non-racialism and multi-ethnicity. The ideas and ways of organising democratic confederalism have been captured in the books written by [Abdullah Öcalan](#), the founder of the PKK and even though now imprisoned for over 20 years by the Turkish regime, one of the main figures in the struggles of the Kurdish people.

By 2010 a mass movement based on democratic confederalism and involving millions of working-class people had arisen in southern Turkey, west Iran and northern Syria. The aim of this movement has always been to build a counter-power that can eventually replace capitalism and the state. The neighbourhood councils are therefore a form of dual power in a pre-revolutionary setting and a form of self-governing popular power in a revolutionary period.

To link all of these new self-initiatives from the bottom and to co-ordinate councils across Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq, the Kurdish Communities Union (KCU) was created. All organisations that are part of the Kurdish liberation struggle - including older parties such as the PKK – have recallable mandated delegates in the KCU. The KCU does not have executive power but it is only a co-ordinating structure operating on mandates from the councils.



ABDULLAH ÖCALAN

Abdullah Öcalan is one of the key leaders in the Kurdish liberation struggles and a founder member of the PKK. He began life politically as a Stalinist in Turkey and was key in the PKK's guerrilla strategy and its aim in the 1980s and early 1990s to found a Kurdish state on similar lines to the Soviet Union.

Öcalan was seen as a major threat by the Turkish state. It wanted to capture him and charge him with treason. By the mid-1990s the PKK began to critically reflect on its politics and slowly began to move towards democratic confederalism. Abdullah Öcalan was a central part of this process.

In the 1990s, Öcalan was in exile in Syria. The Turkish state put pressure on the Syrian state to expel Öcalan and in 1999 he left Syria with the intention to seek exile in South Africa. On his way to South Africa, he passed through Kenya where he was captured by the Turkish Intelligence Agency with the help of the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Öcalan was then taken back to Turkey and convicted by the state for treason and sentenced

to death. At the time, Turkey was trying to join the European Union (EU) and the EU would not allow states to join if they allowed the death penalty. This, and pressure by activists across the world, led the Turkish state to commute Öcalan's death sentence to life in prison.

Since then, Öcalan has been held on the prison island of Imrali. He has often been held in solitary confinement for years at a stretch. In prison he has continued to reflect and critique the past politics of the PKK and to move closer towards democratic confederalism. He also read the books of the anarchist and libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin who had a major impact on his thinking. Öcalan too began to analyse the rise of patriarchy and how it was linked to the rise of states and exploitation. Out of this in the 2000s and 2010s he began to write books around the ideas of democratic confederalism and how it was crucial to bringing about direct democracy and women's liberation in the Middle East.

This has been a major threat to the states in which the KCU exists, so the Turkish, Iranian and Syrian states have been attempting to smash the various and associated struggles. Thousands of Kurdish activists have been imprisoned and murdered by these states in the process over the last two decades. These states have also attempted to act ruthlessly against protest by activists affiliated to the KCU. In 2004, the Turkish state killed over 70 Kurdish activists when protests occurred in the south of the country.

To resist this onslaught, the PKK guerrilla army was gradually transformed into a democratic militia and a low scale war has since been waged. Self-defence units were also established to resist the repression and violence of states in the Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria.

In Turkey, Iran and Iraq, democratic confederalism has not yet replaced the state and capitalism; it is still a resistance movement. In Syria, however, democratic confederalism has gone even further. In the north of Syria, a social revolution has begun in which democratic confederalism has started to replace capitalist economic and social relations as well as the local state. Indeed, in northern Syria one of the most far-reaching revolutions in history is currently underway and is known as the Rojava revolution.

CHAPTER 5:

REVOLUTION IN ROJAVA



“There have been attempts to replace

capitalism with a communal economy.”

The Rojava revolution happened as part of the Arab Spring. In late 2010, protests by millions of people took place in many countries in North Africa and the Middle East. The protests were aimed at the undemocratic regimes that existed in these countries and they soon also spread to Syria.



Source: www.makerojavagreenagain.org

In some of the countries, such as Bahrain and Iran, these protests were brutally repressed by the states that were targeted, with the military unleashing vicious and sustained violence against the protests. In Bahrain, the police and military killed 122 protestors and activists during the Arab Spring protests.

While some gains were made in some countries, in others a counter-revolution happened. For example, in Egypt the military eventually undertook a coup and this ended the hopes of the Arab Spring in that country.

In the vast majority of the countries that saw the Arab Spring protests, the protests never ended up fundamentally questioning or attacking the state, capitalism or class rule. They were aimed rather at winning a new representative parliamentary system. In other words, they did not seek a new society where there would be revolutionary political, social and economic change. This contributed to the defeat of the Arab Spring uprisings, either by initial state repression or state-directed counter-revolutions at a later stage.

IN ONE PLACE IT WAS DIFFERENT

In 2011 protests against the brutal Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria began to take place and the protestors initially called for greater democracy. The state moved to violently suppress the protests in the main cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. Some of the Syrian state's high ranking army officials, however, broke with al-Assad and the protests soon became armed. The US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia also made contact with Islamist elements of the protests and began arming them. Through this intervention, Islamic fundamentalists gained dominance over the protest movement and high-jacked it for a conservative agenda of implementing an Islamic state.

By late 2011 the situation had descended into a civil war in most parts of Syria. On one side was the Al-Assad regime backed by Russia and Iran; on the other were various Islamic groups – including ISIS – that were backed at various times by the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other Gulf states.

Both sides attempted to try and win the support of the Kurdish areas in the north of Syria – i.e. Rojava. Since the Kurds in Rojava had been building a progressive counter-power based on direct democracy



Imperialist rivalries between the United States and Russia have fueled the Syrian Civil War. Artwork by Carlos Latuff.

and feminism through the council system of democratic confederalism, they elected to support neither side. Rather they decided on a third way – a progressive social revolution that would lead to an end to patriarchy, the state and capitalism.

Throughout 2011, the councils of the democratic confederalism in Rojava had been organising protests against the al-Assad regime and the movement had been gaining ground. On the 19th July 2012, the neighbourhood councils in the city of Kobane in Rojava decided that they would end the power of the state in that area. On that day, protestors and the democratic militia from the neighbourhood

councils surrounded the military bases and took over government buildings. Surrounded by thousands of protestors, most of the soldiers in these military bases chose to surrender. They were given the choice of remaining in Rojava and joining the revolution or leaving to an area of their choice. The military bases and police stations were then taken over and the weapons distributed to the neighbourhood councils.

These actions spread within a few days to other towns and cities in Rojava. Many of the people involved in this had been building a popular movement for almost a decade that had the vision of implementing a radical concept of democratic confederalism.

IMPLEMENTING DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

Since 2012, when the Syrian state was effectively ejected and defeated by protests, people living in Rojava – Kurds, Turks and Arabs – have expanded structures of direct democracy.

This involved setting up neighbourhood councils to begin with. Soon, however, it was also decided to set up smaller units based on streets to allow for democracy even at a street by street level. These smaller street by street assemblies were named communes. The communes were a way of creating a street by street democracy at a very local level in which all people in a street could meet and decide how to run things locally and collectively.

Thousands of communes – each made up of 60 to 100 households at a street level – were created across Rojava to run the society from the grassroots on the basis of a radical democracy without a state. The idea behind setting up communes was to create very local structures that would hold power and that are based on direct democracy at a street-level. In implementing democratic confederalism activists took a decision that there needed to be street level democracy and communes were the structure that would allow this.



This was done through a mass movement called the Movement for a Democratic Society or TEV-DEM. The communes had parallels with the idea of street committees in South Africa in the 1980s.

People themselves through participation in the communes decide through direct democracy on policies, plans, and how to meet the needs of people in their streets. They too democratically deal with issues through commissions on economics, politics, justice, ideology, defence and women's liberation. The participation in communes is not a political party affair and political parties are not represented.

The communes have full autonomy and are where true power resides. Through mass meetings they are the sole decision making bodies regarding the economy, services, development, education, women's liberation and defence in the areas they cover. No structure or institution has any right or ability to arbitrarily override decisions made by the communes.

So for example, though the communes people decide and carry out housing projects in their area; they maintain services like the roads, water connections, electricity connections; they decide what education is needed and how it should be delivered. They are also responsible for the political education of all members.

The communes, while being autonomous, are federated into neighbourhood councils to whom the communes send mandated and recallable delegates to share their ideas, views and plans as a means of ensuring co-ordination from below.

Recallable delegates from the neighbourhood councils are then sent to city assemblies. The city assemblies are then federated into three cantonal (provincial assemblies) comprised of mandated delegates. These are all linked together through delegates that are sent to a structure that covers the entire region called the Syrian Democratic Council.

The former state buildings that were taken over in July 2012 have since been transformed into cultural centres and educational institutions. In these former symbols of repression, education based on feminism and liberation is now taking place. It is this kind of education for a new society upon which the revolution is being built. Indeed, education is central to the revolution and is the key to breaking the capitalist, statist and patriarchal thinking with which the state and ruling class have indoctrinated people.

The Rojava communes are also responsible for justice and safety locally. Members of each commune take turns patrolling the streets to ensure safety and to address any crimes, in particular, gender-based or domestic violence. Justice is also largely dispensed at a local level through the communes. If a crime is committed structures set up by the commune responsible for justice hold a court and the aim of the system is to implement restorative justice. If a serious crime is committed like rape or murder, there is a court system that exists under the auspices of the cantonal assemblies.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM AND THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

On the economic front in Rojava, there have been attempts to replace capitalism with a communal economy. At the heart of this experiment are worker self-managed co-operatives that produce not for profits, but to meet peoples' needs. Besides being based on workers' democracy, these co-operatives are also accountable to everyone involved in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (as Rojava is now officially known) through being answerable to the federated communes.

Small-sized businesses still do exist, but these are required to be based on meeting peoples' needs and are reportedly accountable to the communes – to temper profit motives and price gouging.



Textile Co-operative in Rojava.
Source: www.greenleftweekly.org.au

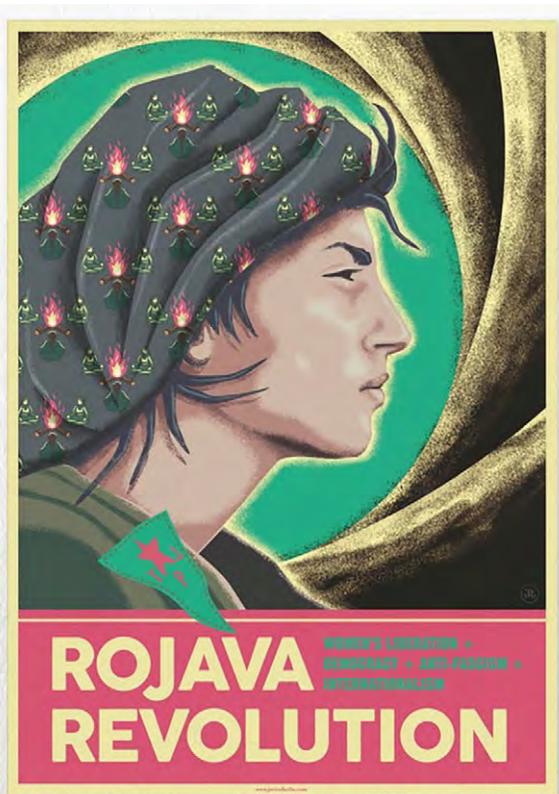
Every co-operative makes its own decisions and works according to those decisions. To make decisions meetings involving all workers are held. To reach a decision a vote by a show of hands or secret ballot is held. The rules of each co-operative specify whether they need more than 50%, 60% or 90% to constitute a majority vote. The rules of work in the co-operatives are decided by a majority and people working in the co-operative are held accountable by the collective. Some co-operatives elect a coordinating committee to coordinate the day by day operations. In such cases, these committee members, however, are paid the same as everyone and are often recallable and subject to the democratic will.

The income that the co-operatives make is divided according to the decisions made democratically by the members. It is usually divided up as follows though: 50% for the people who work and participate in the co-operative, 25% is invested into the co-operative's development and growth and a percentage is set aside for the needs of the commune, like health, education and defence. The needs of the commune and the co-operative are prioritised and the people working in the co-operatives are also members of the commune

Most of the co-operatives are small or medium-sized. Some, however, are very large. For example, there is a co-operative that is building housing for women and is made up of 20 000 women members.

WOMEN'S COUNCILS AND MOVEMENT

Beyond the commune system, there are women-only councils and these are federated through the Yekitiya Star (the Star Union – Star refers to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar). Yekitiya Star is central to women's liberation in Rojava and is at the core of the women's movement. All women involved in social, political and militia work are members.



Women's liberation is seen as the key to social revolution in Rojava. Source: www.internationalcommune.org

Political education is at the centre of the work of Yekitiya Star and twice a month members visit every neighbourhood in Rojava to educate people on the agenda of the revolution. Ten day training courses on the communes and councils are also provided to participants in the communes.

Yekitiya Star produces two newspapers Ronahi and Denge Jiyan. These have articles on women's history, analysis of the democratic family, news of gains made for women in the council system, and on democratic confederalism. Yekitiya Star also runs peace committees in neighbourhoods throughout Rojava. These act essentially as democratic women's courts and they deal with cases of domestic and gender based violence, forced marriages, the non-payment of child support as well as underage marriages.

Yekitiya Star runs 26 educational centres across Rojava that conduct political education, but also courses on computer use, language, first aid, health, art and culture. The courses offered are democratically decided on by the participating women based on what they desire or need. A key course, however, is 'women's science', which

aims to challenge the monopoly control that dominant groups (mostly men) have over knowledge, and to promote a vision of a good life consistent with the vision of the communal-council system.

Yelitiya Star is also involved in establishing women's co-operatives including textile, catering, dairy, agricultural and industrial co-operatives. The women's cooperatives allow women to gain confidence and to support their family. However, of more importance is the role that cooperatives play in collective efforts at achieving a free life and more specifically free women. They help to challenge the patriarchal structure of society by ensuring a level of social and economic equality is established. When women take the role of being major contributors within the economy, men are challenged to view and revise their perception of women's role within society.

DEFENSE OF THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION

The defense of the Rojava revolution is primarily based on democratic militia. There are two types of militia. One is the general militia called the People's Protection Units (YPG). The other is a women's only militia called the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

The YPG and YPJ are made up of volunteers and the officers within these militia are elected and are recallable by the members. Most of the fighters within these militia are Kurds but there are also a substantial minority of fighters who are Arabs and even internationalist volunteers from across the world.

In late 2015, the YPG founded the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF includes people that are conscripted. The conscripts, however, are only responsible for setting up check-points behind the front lines — only volunteers in the militia do fighting on the front lines.



Community members are central to self-defense In Rojava. Source: www.anarkismo.org

Over the course of eight years, the people of the Rojava – mainly through these democratic militia – have fought off the many dangers that have been posed to the revolution, which included the forces of the Syrian state, ISIS and the Turkish state. In the process, a tactical military alliance was formed in 2015 with the US, which arose because the Kurdish forces proved the most capable in combatting and defeating ISIS.

THE INTRODUCTION OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

By 2016, a form of representative democracy had also been introduced in the Syrian Democratic Council – although a majority of its members are still made up of mandated and recallable delegates from the commune and assembly system. Other parties and formations – who were not mandated delegates from the communes and assemblies – also began to participate in the Syrian Democratic Council through an election. Along with this, the Syrian Democratic Council also elected ministers – one man and one woman – to co-ordinate various functions across Rojava like foreign relations.

This has proven to be a controversial issue. Some argue the introduction of a form of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council undermines the direct democracy envisioned in democratic confederalism and is similar to the system that exists under a state system.

Those arguing for the introduction of some representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council contend that as a minority of parties and organisations had refused to participate in the communes and neighbourhood assemblies some form of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council was necessary to also give such people a say. Those defending this move, also point out that the communes remain the real holders of power and form a majority within the Syrian Democratic Councils. They also argue that the Syrian Democratic Council or ministers cannot override the decisions made by communes nor impose any policy, practice or law on them that runs counter to the principles and values of democratic confederalism.

Ultimately it does seem to be the case that the communes do hold real power, although introducing elements of representative democracy in the Syrian Democratic Council holds the real danger of introducing new hierarchies.

GAINS OF THE REVOLUTION

The Rojava revolution has achieved many gains. The majority of people for the first time in their lives have varying degrees of real power. They decide on all key matters in their community democratically as opposed to having state officials decide. They also decide how workplaces should be run democratically and democracy is part of workplaces, which is the exact opposite to how things exist under capitalism. The roots of genuine freedom have begun to take hold.

For women, the gains of the revolution have been massive. Through Yelitiya Star domestic and gender-based violence are being truly addressed. Women have become central to the revolution and are breaking free of the roles they had been confined to under a patriarchal society.

The economic freedom women are achieving through the co-operatives means they no longer have to remain in relationships that they don't want to. Women are also central to public politics and are no longer seen as belonging in only the domestic sphere. Many are volunteers in the militia of the communes and play a key role in the defence of the revolution. Currently, 4.6 million people live and participate in this system in Rojava, which is now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

THREATS FROM MANY SIDES

The US, as always, has only adhered to the tactical military alliance with Rojava for its own purposes and has categorically refused to politically recognise the existence of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. It recently announced that its troops would pull out of Syria in a move that could potentially give the Turkish state a much more free hand to engage in unilateral military intervention.

The people of Rojava are well aware that the US state cannot be trusted in the long run. An alliance was formed simply because allies were needed in the fight against ISIS. The people of Rojava, however, have no illusions in the US state and know it could drop them at any minute or even launch a war against them.

The Turkish state has also viewed Rojava as a major threat and has attempted to crush it through various means. The Turkish state fears the Revolution will spread into Turkey itself and they do not want an experiment in direct democracy, feminism, ecology, anti-statism, and anti-capitalism to succeed.

Between 2012 and 2018 the Turkish state assisted various Islamic groups within Syria that were attempting to smash Rojava. This even included allowing members of ISIS to cross over the Turkish border to attack cities in Rojava such as Kobane. It is suspected by many in Rojava that the Turkish state has been secretly arming groups such as ISIS.

In 2015 there was a mass uprising by Kurds in the southern parts of Turkey in solidarity with Rojava. Some Kurdish towns and cities attempted to break with the Turkish state and fully implement democratic confederalism. This was met with brutal force by the Turkish army that was sent to crush the uprising. In

the process, it claimed to have killed 2 583 Kurdish fighters, while 483 of its troops were killed. Whole Kurdish villages and towns were bulldozed by the Turkish state as part of the military operation. After the uprising, the Turkish state was more determined than ever before to crush Rojava.

In October 2019, the Turkish state, in fact, began an invasion of northern Syria to end the revolution. Already in 2018, the Turkish state invaded and took control over a part of Rojava, in and around the city of Afrin. In October 2019 a new invasion began and through this Erdogan and the Turkish state were attempting to violently create a Turkish-controlled 'buffer zone' all along the Turkish-Syrian border, a plan which would effectively break-up Rojava. As a result of the Turkish state's military actions, 170 000 people have fled from the northernmost towns of Rojava. Militia in Rojava have been resisting this invasion. Forces under the control of the Turkish state have even been executing civilians and they are trying ethnically cleans the north of Rojava of Kurds.

Despite the threats that Rojava has faced, the YPG and YPJ have been very effective at defending the revolution. The reason for this is they are all part of the mass movement of democratic confederalism and of the communes in Rojava. They are also accountable to the communes.

They, therefore, don't exist separately from most of society like a traditional guerrilla force but are part of the mass movement and the defensive structures of that movement.

In October 2019, it was very unclear whether the YPG and YPJ could resist the Turkish military, which is massive. In fact, the Turkish military is the second biggest military in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Only the USA military is bigger than Turkey's in NATO. The YPG and YPJ allowed Syrian troops into some parts of Rojava in October 2019 – although not all – and what this means for the revolution is unclear.

Nonetheless, Rojava shows that people, even in a civil war, can create an alternative to the capitalist and state system. This alone is inspiring and shows that an alternative to the brutal capitalist system is possible.

The Turkish state has offered support to ISIS in its fight against Rojava, including allowing ISIS fighters to freely cross its borders during the battle of Kobane. Cartoon by La Tuff



CHAPTER 6:

SHOWING US THE POTENTIAL FOR A BETTER WAY



"If people in Rojava can create the architecture

and practice of direct democracy and pathways

to a grassroots socialism, so too can we in South Africa."

Despite some weaknesses and the threats the Rojava revolution faces, especially from the Turkish military, it is a beacon of hope for all progressive activists and the oppressed. Specifically for South Africans, the revolution holds real lessons and potential hope precisely because when the leadership of the liberation movement in South Africa gained state power, it promised to use this to improve people's lives, end racism, address sexism and bring about equality. Those promises have not been fulfilled in any meaningful way.

The analysis, shared by many including those who are part of the Kurdish liberation struggle, that once in state power, former liberation movements become a new elite, led by new rulers that develop self-serving interests precisely due to their new power and privileged positions they occupy, has proven to be correct. It is exactly why we sit with corruption throughout the state in South Africa as officials abuse the hierarchical power they have to enrich themselves.

Democratic confederalism, as is shown in Syria, offers another way to run society. Its direct democracy can temper corruption and create greater equality as power cannot be centralised in such a system and wealth cannot be accumulated individually.

Importantly Rojava shows us direct democracy can be put in place and it can work. Many people in power, and even some leftists, claim direct democracy can't exist in reality and it can't work. They argue some centralised power is needed to make decisions effectively. Rojava shows such arguments are wrong.

Rojava also shows how the direct democracy that framed people's power in South Africa can be revived and adapted to the context of today. If people in Rojava can create the architecture and practice of direct democracy and pathways to a grassroots socialism, so too can we in South Africa with our rich history of struggling for a counter-power based on direct democracy at a local level. Rojava shows such experiments in South Africa can be self-organised again for local conditions and that inequality, patriarchy, the state and capitalism can be successfully challenged. Indeed, what Rojava shows us is that self-organisation and self-education are key to achieving freedom rather than vanguardism and political messiahs.

Rojava also reminds us that our struggles need to be based on progressive principles and values, and that these need to be practised today and not sometime in the future, after the revolution. If we want a progressive society in the future, it has to start in practice in our movements today. Rojava shows that non-racist, non-sexist, multi-ethnic and generally inclusive principles and values can be lived realities too, through a radical democracy and participatory revolutionary process. This is something that is desperately needed in South Africa where gender-based violence, sexism and racism are everyday occurrences, including within many of our movements.

In South Africa, we are saddled with one of the most corrupt private sectors in the world. Practices such as price gouging, collusion, transfer pricing and tax evasion and avoidance are prevalent in the private sector. Working conditions are often harsh and even brutal. For the working class majority, pay is low, which is one of the reasons we are one of the most unequal societies in the world. Racism in the workplaces is rife and is historically linked to the low wages of black workers and the exploitation faced. Unemployment increases year-by-year and more and more workers are being forced into precarious work. Past revolutions have shown, however, that nationalisation is often not the answer. Developments in Syria to create a socialised communal economy that is democratic shows another path can be followed. It shows bosses are not needed and that workers and communities themselves can run companies and enterprises democratically.

Importantly, Rojava demonstrates that for a revolution or even effective organising to take place women's activism and the liberation of women needs to be front and centre. The reason why democratic confederalism is practically effective is that it involves all people – and all people means women. In South Africa, while women are a majority in movements and struggles, it is men who are usually the leaders. Rojava shows this needs to change and can change.

In order to create a more democratic and egalitarian path (which democratic confederalism shows can be done) a new mass movement in South Africa with a new vision, clear ethics, sound principles and truly democratic practices are needed.

Without such a movement we will remain mired in a society defined by oppression, exploitation and corruption. Building such a movement will be no easy task, but what the Rojava revolution so directly and clearly shows us, is that it can be done.

DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM



Source: [wwwhttps://facebook.com/pg/Friends-of-Kurdish-Freedom-Cork-184973168787326/posts/](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Friends-of-Kurdish-Freedom-Cork-184973168787326/posts/)



www.ilrigsa.org.za