Rojava, Imperialism and Revolution

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The heroic resistance of the Kurdish self defence units of the YPG / YPJ is undoubtedly currently at the forefront of the fight for a progressive development in the Middle East. As part of the liberation struggle of an oppressed nation, it deserves our support, regardless of our attitude to the political leadership of the combatants, the level of political consciousness or its strategic objectives.

At the same time, this fight also raises a number of policy questions. What attitude should revolutionaries take to attempts, above all by US imperialism, to embrace the struggle as a means of gaining control over it? Is the Kurdish resistance (and, indeed, the Syrian revolution) becoming a subordinate factor within a US-led imperialist intervention? What strategy is needed to defend the achievements in Rojava? How can the revolution be extended?

Objective of US intervention

The rapid rise of the arch-reactionary, clerical fascist "Islamic State", its conquest of Mosul and acquisition of large stocks of modern weapons have caused US imperialism to plan a new "humanitarian" intervention. President Obama has declared a new "war on terror". No doubt he was more driven into this, rather than looking for a new armed conflict, after the ignominious withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the acceptance of the Assad regime as an ally of Russia and Iran.

In recent decades, US policy, the capitalist crisis and the shifting balance of power between the imperialist states have together created conditions that once again require a more direct intervention by the US and its allies. After the victory in the Cold War, the remaining, apparently omnipotent ?superpower?, the USA, wanted to create a ?New World Order?, particularly in the Middle East, where today we can see instead the failure of this attempt.

To name only the most important factors that led to the current development:

a) The attempt to base the creation of the ?New World Order? on the war against the Iraqi regime, the fall of Saddam Hussein and his Ba'ath Party, has not ?restructured? Iraq but, rather, permanently destabilised it. This state, which was in any case an artificial creation of imperialism after the First World War, is now facing collapse.

b) In addition, the imposition of neo-liberal economic policy throughout the region has led to enormous aggravation of social inequality and class antagonisms. Crisis, war, and military occupation have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, a flood of refugees and the intensification of national and religious antagonisms. Not only have the vast majority of peasants and workers been impoverished, indeed reduced to abject misery, but also large sections of the middle classes and the urban petty bourgeoisie are facing ruin.

c) All of this has created the conditions for the Arab Revolution and, given the deep crisis of leadership of the working class and the lack of revolutionary communist parties that organise even only the vanguard of the proletariat, also for the growth of the counterrevolution.

d) The decline of US imperialism, its diminishing ability to maintain its military superiority in a stable and controlled imperialist order has not only led to its imperialist rivals (Russia and China and, to some extent, the European powers) coming onto the scene, but also regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and even Qatar, who hope to strengthen their own influence and free themselves a little from imperialist domination.
Syrian revolution

It was against this background that the Syrian Revolution broke out. Due to the brutal repression by the reactionary Assad regime, revolution quickly took the form of a civil war, one of the sharpest forms of the class struggle.

The revolution allowed the Kurdish nation (including the now embattled Kobanê) that is, the three cantons that form Rojava, to effectively establish self-rule. Run by the sister party of the PKK, the PYD, they proposed a so-called "Third Way" strategy by manoeuvring between the Assad regime and the forces of the Syrian Revolution. In this way, the Kurdish areas tried to stay out of the fighting and to keep their distance from both the Assad regime and the forces of the Syrian Revolution such as the "Free Syrian Army", local self-organised units, etc.

Undoubtedly, this step was also influenced by the fact that the leadership of the Syrian opposition, like Assad, was largely opposed to the self-determination of the Kurdish people.

Nevertheless, it was, from the start, a short-sighted, narrow-minded and politically wrong strategy. First, it meant that the leadership of the self-governing territories offered no political perspective and orientation, to the Kurdish population, especially for the working class, in the big cities like Aleppo.

Second, the whole policy was predicated on there being a balance of feuding forces in the Civil War. A victory for Assad, it was always clear, would mean the end of any Kurdish self-government and new, brutal national oppression. To this end it was clear that he would not shrink from mass murder, given that he had been prepared to see 200,000 dead and millions made refugees to maintain his own power.

A victory for the FSA, today a very distant prospect, would also have led to conflicts, even if there were more and more forces within the FSA that were not under the control of its central leadership and could have been won to supporting the right of self-determination of the Kurds. It is no accident that the PYD and the self-defence units of Kobanê are today militarily allied to the brigades of the FSA, and with no other force in Syria.

Rojava would never have been created without the Syrian Revolution. It is a product of the revolution and today one of its last remaining centres. On the other hand, it is also clear that it ultimately cannot survive without the revival and the victory of the Syrian, indeed the Arab, revolution.

Iraq, Turkey ...

What is true of Syria, also applies to the other countries. In Iraq, under the reactionary leadership of Barzani (KDP) and Talabani (PUK) a self-governing Kurdish region, the first step to a Kurdish state, was created, as in Rojava, the flip side of the disintegration of Iraq (as Rojava is the flip side of the disintegration of Syria).

The objective of the imperialist powers, especially the US, is to maintain the imperialist order and boundaries between the states created in the 20s after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Iraqi and Syrian states are to be patched up somehow. A collapse in Jordan or Lebanon would further exacerbate these problems. At the same time, the decay of these states is practically unstoppable because of war, occupation, crisis and the disappearance of Ba'athism, which could combine repression with social integration for some time.

The mere fact that the US and other imperialist powers do not want to alter this "order" but to restore it, makes it reactionary and gives it an almost desperate character. In any case, a "return" to a "functioning" Iraq or Syria is unthinkable without a bloody counter-revolutionary victory. In Syria, US imperialism and the West have effectively had to come to terms with Assad and Russian influence.

The strategic risk, for them, is the loss of Iraq. The problem is how to establish a "reliable" client regime. The arch-reactionary, religious-sectarian policy of the Maliki regime has only created the conditions for the rise of the IS and its alliance with the Sunni tribes and officers of the old Iraqi army.
The Kurdish part of Iraq now appears to be the ‘most reliable’ ally, but this poses enormous problems with the Iraqi regime and Turkey. The latter aims to increase its own influence and would have preferred a UN mandate to occupy a part of Syria in the form of a ‘protection zone’, above all in the Kurdish border areas.

All this shows why the US and its Western allies, as well as those from the Arab world itself, must increase their presence again. Therefore, Obama has given a virtually unlimited mandate for air strikes in Iraq and Syria. Even though he probably wants to avoid a ground invasion of Iraq, it is unclear, given the local political conflict situation, how the country is to be stabilised in the US interest without ground troops.

Rojava and military intervention

Against this background, the question is posed, how the labour movement, and revolutionaries, should respond to such an intervention. It is clear that not only ground forces, but also air strikes by imperialists should be rejected. The left should clearly oppose and mobilise against those in the trades unions and labour movements in the United States, Britain, France and all other countries who support such interventions.

Even if the US is, for the moment, bombing Jihadist positions around Rojava (and although it is of course perfectly legitimate for the Kurdish defenders to take advantage of such attacks) the objectives of the US bombing campaign must be understood in their entirety and not as an isolated strike limited to Kobanê.

The imperialist attacks only serve to enforce a reactionary new order in the Middle East. The Islamic State and its atrocities serve as a pretext, an ideological justification.

Support for such attacks, or intervention by the UN with ‘blue helmets’ or a vaguely defined ‘international community’, that is, a reactionary assembly of all imperialist robbers and semi-colonial regional powers, is nothing other than acceptance of their right to intervene, as the ‘regulatory power’ in the so-called ‘Third World’. It would mean political subordination to one's own bourgeoisie, recognising it as a ‘reliable’ ally of the oppressed.

Arming the Kurds

Instead of such imperialist intervention, whether with air strikes, or even more so with ground troops, we are for the arming of the Kurdish fighters without any economic and political conditions.

Of course, the imperialists (or other states) are also pursuing political objectives. However, while ground troops or air units, or the Navy, of an imperialist state are still under its control and hence serve its war aims, it is quite possible that the workers and peasants of a rebellious people or an oppressed nation could take control of weapons even if they were delivered by reactionary imperialist powers.

Whether that would be successful is ultimately a question of political struggle and the balance of political forces.

In Rojava that means first of all that the weapons should be used to defend the gains already made. Here may be mentioned in particular: the equality of women, of all religions and nationalities; the expropriation of large estates as an important step towards an agricultural revolution.

Revolutionaries must support this without any ifs or buts. Of course, these weapons could also be misused by the PYD, but to reject the armament of the Kurds because of this hypothetical possibility would mean denying them the means of defending themselves here and now. It would either facilitate the victory of IS or make the Kurds dependent on the gracious help of Turkey or the USA.

The ‘Rojava Commune’?

The need to support the fight for Kobanê unconditionally, does not change the fact that the ‘Rojava Commune’? and the policy of the PYD must also be assessed with Marxist criteria.

It is often claimed that Rojava is building a progressive social model. However, when we speak of another model of
society beyond capitalism, we mean more than the reforms that have taken place so far in Rojava. What they have brought is a more democratic political regime and an expropriation of large estates, that is, radical and fundamental elements of a bourgeois revolution.

No more radical changes, no attack on bourgeois property relations, however, has occurred and that is not part of the programme of the PYD and PKK. What that expresses is an attempt to find a ?third way? between capitalism and socialism, in which all forms of property (including the private ownership of means of production) should be subordinated to the common good. However, this is, at best, wishful thinking, as evidenced equally by both historical experience and the analysis of capital.

This petty-bourgeois utopia reflects the class basis of PYD and PKK. They are petty-bourgeois nationalist movements / parties who stand for the use of quite revolutionary (not legalistic / parliamentary) means to achieve a democratic revolution. Socially, they are based on different social classes, the peasantry, the urban petty bourgeoisie and small businesses and also workers. Ideologically, this is reflected in a mixture of both Stalinist and libertarian-anarchist elements, which are codified in the so-called ?democratic confederalism?.

There is not enough space here to present a detailed critique of this concept. We argue that this strategy cannot ultimately lead to the liberation of the Kurdish people from national and social oppression.

Why? Firstly, because it does not set democratic demands in the context of a transformation of property relations, the establishment of a democratic planned economy. Secondly, because it does not understand the Kurdish revolution as part of the permanent revolution in the Middle East, the need for the establishment of workers' and peasants' governments and a federation of Socialist states.

However, precisely these two points are the crucial, strategic cornerstone of a revolutionary working-class politics in Kurdistan, as in the whole region. A revolutionary workers' party must base itself on them in order to advance the revolution, or else it will itself be tossed around in the maelstrom of events.

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