

Meet the Internationalist Commune of Rojava

by Mohammed Elnaiem - 01/12/2017 20:11



Under the tutelage of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, communists and anarchists from around the world have built a commune to do their part in the transformations that are taking place across the region.

“We, as internationalists from the Middle East, Asia, Europa, America and Oceania” a statement defining themselves read, “have been working in different structures of the revolution in Rojava and Northern Syria for many years.”

Although many of their members have lived in Northern Syria for longer, the Internationalist Commune of Rojava was officially announced in 2017, with a base of activists coming from different countries. Some of the communards are from Europe and others are from Latin America. Most self-identify as either anarchists, feminists, and communists. Many call themselves all three.

“The diversity of identities and backgrounds enrich our debates and our organization”, they told The Region.

The Internationalist commune of Rojava is one of the 3732 communes that have been created in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. They work closely with the Y.C.R (Yekitiya Ciwanen Rojava), the youth movement of Northern Syria, and they base themselves on the principles of democratic autonomy. They hope to become a sanctuary for internationalist youth across the globe. “We are trying to strengthen the internationalist dimension of this revolution,” a spokesperson told The Region.

By working with the youth movement of Northern Syria, the Internationalist Commune have also succeeded in doing what many of their internationalist predecessors couldn't do. They are an officially recognized political body in Northern Syria's revolutionary experiment.

The socio-political experiment of Northern Syria began in 2012 when Assad forces retreated from the north of the country and left a vacuum that was quickly seized upon by Kurdish activists. Those activists came together to form Tev-Dem, the Movement for a Democratic Society. Alongside a Kurdish party persecuted by the Assad government called the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the movement initiated a process to reconstruct society along more communalist lines.

The TEV-DEM movement and the PYD are inspired by the ideas of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, they sought to neither support the Assad Government or the armed rebellion against his rule. Instead, they proposed a system called “Democratic Confederalism”, which at its root, would be based on the decisions of the neighbourhood commune. Power, they argued, is to be delegated upwards to the village, town, city and cantonal level. And although the idea was proposed by the Kurdish movement, they argued that it was for everybody.

“The Democratic nation,” wrote Ocalan from his prison cell in Imrali Island, “is the model of a nation that is the least exposed to such illnesses of being a state nation”. To the Kurds of the Tev-Dem movement, the nation itself was redefined to encompass the various peoples of the region, from Arabs to Kurds, and Assyrians to Yezidi's. The nation didn't want to have a state, it wanted to organise itself autonomously from the state. The nation wasn't what made ethnicities, clans, and tribes different. It was what made them the same: their desire to govern their own

daily lives.

Tev-Dem argued that all of the peoples should have the power and authority to autonomously decide on the matters that concern them in particular. Women are central to the project of democratic confederalism, and on every level of governance, they are not only included but bestowed with the power to autonomously decide on their particular concerns.

After the siege of Kobane by ISIS was defeated, with 1500 Kurdish fighters expelling around 9000 IS militants from their stronghold, many anarchists and Communists sought to sojourn to Northern Syria to help in any way they could. Comparisons began to be drawn between Rojava (Western Kurdistan) and revolutionary Spain in 1936. The “Rojava revolution” attracted both admiration and scorn within radical leftist circles, and no matter where a leftist went, it could no longer be ignored.

“It became a new hope for revolutionaries all around the world”, a spokesperson for the ICR told The Region. “This made a lot of people from different countries travel to Rojava.”

While many flocked to Northern Syria to learn more about the ideology and try to play their part, there was the problem of finding a place for them to fit in, especially in war-time. “In the beginning, it was difficult for internationalists to find their place, especially the ones who came to work in the civil society”, the ICR told The Region.

In a war economy, the fundamental interest is survival. Most of the resources were allocated for the war effort, and they were significantly limited due to an embargo by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and the Government of Turkey.

But thankfully, Northern Syria was different back then than it is now. “With the help of the Kurdish movement and the cooperation of the Youth movement of Rojava, we are working within the structures of the revolution” the spokesperson was happy to report.

Since the battle of Kobane, many residents of Northern Syria look forward to reconstructing their homes now that the Islamic State is almost defeated. On September, Reuters reported that some 3,700 communes spread across three regions were beginning to vote for their local representatives. On December 1st, the second phase of elections began the vote for the town, city, district and cantonal levels of governance. The huge turnout included not just Kurds, but Arabs and Assyrians as well. And while a Turkish invasion remains a fundamental threat to their

project, the Internationalist Commune of Rojava operates in an environment of relative peace as compared to the rest of the country.

The ICR is now trying to construct an Internationalist academy for revolutionaries around the world to come and learn about the project taking place in Northern Syria. They are also working on an ecological project for the reforestation of the region.

“We don’t just want to teach people about the principles of this revolution, we want to live a communal life that gives meaning to education, we want to put these concepts into practice.” They even hope to host an Internationalist library housing the most important ideological texts from the revolutionary traditions of Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and more broadly, the whole world.

It’s hard not to notice the resonance of their project with the past. Even in 1917, during the year that the Bolshevik revolution successfully uprooted Tsarist Russia, communist intellectuals were talking about the need for a Socialist republic to awaken “the peoples of the East”. After the revolution succeeded, leftists from all across the globe travelled to the USSR to receive the ideological training that they felt was needed to wage their struggles back home. It would have been hard to imagine back then that a century later, Easterners are doing what they can to awaken “the peoples of the West”.

The Bolsheviks believed that a Russian Revolution was not for Russia alone, and that it needed to aid itself with the anti-colonial struggles taking place in Asia and Africa. In 1921, the Bolsheviks set up the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. By 1928, an estimated 1000 foreign students graduated from the program.

These were anti-colonial theorists who felt disillusioned by the claims of Western colonial powers to liberty and human rights. They hoped to get support from the USSR, but they also hoped to learn about the ideological principles of their revolutionary effort. Among them was a former cook who initially took the western route for independence but was rejected by France. He would later be called Ho Chi Minh, the leader who ushered Vietnam into independence. Others included Harry Haywood, a black Marxist revolutionary who would lay the foundations for a black communist tradition in the U.S. and Nazim Hikmet, a Turkish poet whose songs are still a motor for revolutionaries in Turkey today. When they all went to KUTV, they were still young in their ideological development. Their time in Moscow changed them, and by extension, changed their homes too.

Can the Internationalist Commune of Rojava be a kind of KUTV for today? It's not certain, particularly now, as they are still building their academy brick by brick. They say they hope to be a reference and inspiration to other movements, who can hopefully build their own internationalist self-managed academies. But the ICR is also not interested in just romanticising the past. "If we want to organize ourselves as internationalists", they told the Region, "we need to learn about our identities and about our societies, learning from the mistakes of our predecessors."

To the ICR, the first International (1865-1877) laid the groundwork for the concept of Internationalism but it also had a blindspot. "It was based on the identity of the workers, and left outside all other oppressed identities."

They contend that while the movements of the past are a source inspiration, they are also influenced by the new vanguard of women at the forefront of the Kurdish movement. "In Rojava, the revolution is a young Kurdish woman" as they like to say.

It's for this reason that the women in the commune organize themselves autonomously. Not only is the woman the revolutionary subject according to the ICR, but it is only by looking through their history that one can even begin to speak about revolution. They have autonomous meetings, and the women of the ICR have even told The Region that they are creating an autonomous space in the academy. They are the "key to fighting capitalist patriarchy", a struggle which they call "multidimensional".

So what exactly was it that got these young revolutionaries on the plane to go to Northern Syria in the first place? They argue that it's the crisis confronting humankind, from environmental degradation and ecocide, to male violence and capitalist exploitation. Many expressed frustration with the luxury of what they called western revolutionary thought, based in the "university lectures halls and the couches of the urban squat".

More importantly, though, they emphasised that it was common humanity which truly pushed them to move halfway across the world.

When asked whether or not they were more useful at home, this was their response: "Revolutionaries love their people and their homeland, but they don't care about borders and states. Solidarity is the tenderness of the peoples, and life starts where the state ends. And that's modern internationalism."

