



"The individual cannot bargain with the State. The State recognizes no coinage but power: and it issues the coins itself."

- Ursula K. Le Guin

NORTH EAST ANARCHIST GROUP



- Little Writings #2 -

Hotbed: The (Lack of) Politics in North-East Football



Hotbed of Soccer

The North-East of England has many great things; beautiful coastlines, rolling hills, splendid architecture and football. Seen as a “hotbed of football”; the back-alleys of tight terraced housing was said to nurture the close control of many a England international in the 20th century, the closure of shipyards and mines provided the spark for the passion the clubs of the area invoke in their community, the people’s willingness to travel near and far for work following those closures is invariably hard-coded into the regional psyche so they think nothing of traveling to Bristol on a Tuesday night to follow their team.

For the most part this is all sycophantic nonsense the media peddle whenever there’s a deadline due for a starry eyed view of the hordes from the north, they do love football don’t they? Up there that is.

During our dispersal and departure from the demo, Police arrested a pro-trans activist in bloc. They were released from the station hours later with no charges.

To this end, our physical presence and voices made the counter demo a big success. Not only did we outnumber the TERFs and make our message clear, but a sense of community, joy and solidarity prevailed on our side. The groups involved showed great organisation. Anti-fascists should aim to grow demographics and forms of counter-mobilisation. Pro-trans culture is increasing in Newcastle through club nights, a festival, self-defence classes, and film screenings.



Among their speakers was Lisa Morgan, who was videoed approvingly quoting from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, using the Big Lie (used by Nazis as a propaganda technique against Jewish people) as a justification for her transphobia. Concerningly yet unsurprisingly, nobody at their event challenged this and afterwards tried to justify it.

TERF stewards stood in high-vis vests forming a parallel line behind the line of Police facing us. Among their most dominant presences were individuals involved in making the TERF propaganda film, 'Adult Human Female' (Preceding the demo, 'Adult Human Female' screened at Tyneside Irish Centre, Newcastle, in November 2022. The Centre was made aware that the film contained transphobic ideology yet proceeded with the screening anyway. Anti-fascists were greeted by the police upon countering the event.)

There were little to no banners or placards held by TERF attendees, excluding one flag carried by a speaker at their event who associates with the organisation 'Male Allies Challenging Sexism'.

They explained their rainbow PACE flag (appearing to be an ironic provocation upon the PRIDE flag) as something they flew (to paraphrase) 'to prove we aren't nazis'. Despite this statement, they seemed more than happy to stand around with known north-east nazis and fascists on the day – Seeming to reflect a further statement of theirs: 'this doesn't need to be a left-wing movement; I'm happy to work with anyone that thinks sex exists'.

Counter-protesters stood their ground until every TERF had left. Police blocked our exit from where the 'Standing For Women' group left.

Sold Your Soul

On the 7th October 2021 Newcastle United Football Club were bought from zero-hour contract baron Mike Ashley and taken over by a consortium of property investors, private enquiry investors and Saudi Arabia's 'Public Investment Fund', whose chairman is the crown prince and prime minister of the state of Saudi Arabia.



This was met with celebration, black and white clad revelers adorned in Saudi flags and traditional head scarves paraded outside St. James' Park with smoke bombs and alcohol.

How Did We Get Here? Part I – Gulf Politics and Dead Slaves

The takeover didn't happen overnight, it was over a year in the making. Despite constant warnings from groups like Amnesty International [1] and Human Rights Watch [2] the reason the takeover had hit troubled water was because of that constant in our lives, capitalism. Qatari media group beIN had an ongoing dispute with the Saudi state over a long Gulf feud between the 2 oil rich nations. beIN held influence with the Premier League though and sent a letter to CEO of the Premier League and also issuing a notice to 19 of the 20 Premier league clubs, Newcastle omitted. These letters weren't against the takeover on human rights grounds but 'lost revenue' – Saudi owned broadcaster beoutQ (a play on beIN) had claimed to be "breaching beIN's copyright" and they wanted solidarity from Premier League clubs in these trying COVID times.

Of course that worked, the sale of Newcastle United was blocked until the issue between Qatar and Saudi broadcasters had been resolved.

This wasn't a surprise, Qatar doesn't care about human rights. Qatar will host the FIFA World Cup for the first time in November 2022. A tournament and governing body not shy of controversy, happy to turn a blind eye to military juntas, fascist regimes, genocides and everything in between – FIFA preaching tolerance to our fellow man only to give the biggest sporting spectacle on Earth to murdering states is nothing new.

5,760 minutes of football will be played in Qatar in stadiums built on the bodies of 6,500 [3] migrant workers. These migrant workers came from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, brought in under the Kafala system [4] a kind of sponsorship for workers in the Gulf States. The workers' travel and housing are provided and they get to work for their family back home! Except of course Kafala is designed to be exploitative, many of the workers come from vulturistic recruitment agencies, the workers are housed in dorm-like apartments often with no heating or plumbing and the state gets away with this because Kafala falls under Interior Ministries and not Labour Ministries so the workers have no rights. Also because the travel visas and employment are linked to the private sponsors, complete control of these workers falls under the hands of private entities.

Workers need written permission from their employers to transfer jobs, leave their job and leave/enter the country. This is the face of modern slavery.

Anti-TERF Counter Demo Report 15/01/2023

The 'Let Women Speak' demo on the 15th of January was announced by 'Standing for Women', a group founded by anti-trans activist Posie Parker (aka Kellie-Jay Keen) and took place outside The Civic Centre, Newcastle. 'Let Women Speak' is an internationally touring hate campaign which aims to oversee the spread of transphobic ideology as 'women's free speech'. In response, NEAG and other North East activist groups (such as North East Against Racism and LGBT Northern Social Group) helped organise an autonomous counter-protest. Originally planned to be held by Greys Monument, Posie Parker relocated the event after becoming aware she would be met by resistance as well as police pressure.

Around 300 of us assembled outside the Civic Centre, with a heavy police presence already surrounding the area. We listened to our speakers who shared personal accounts of misogyny experiences and expressed their support for their trans comrades. Many of us raised placards with pride, some of which read: "There's no equality without the T", "Protect Trans Kids", "It's a public health issue – Nurses for Trans rights", "Trans people are a gift" and "My feminism is inclusive".

Later, an estimated 100 TERF supporters gathered and began their static rally; we moved closer to their line and began to make noise – using our voices, speakers, phones, kazoos, whistles, drums and playing music to drown out their hate speech. We chanted: "Sisters united will never be divided.", "Trans rights matter. Trans lives matter.", "Fascists and Transphobes off our streets. Who's streets? Our streets!.", "You have nazis in your ranks", and we were successfully heard in all of their livestream recordings.

[INTERVIEWER] — I'll close in the way that these things always do. Is there anywhere that people/readers can go in order to support you, be that financially or otherwise?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] — Of course! It is very important for us to be heard, and so we try to translate our material into English: to speak out about those in Russia who are not afraid to resist! And you can subscribe to our Solidarity Zone accounts on Telegram, Instagram and Facebook. Very recently we have also started one on Twitter (https://linktr.ee/solidarity_zone). We also have a Patreon account, the money from which is divided equally among the collective's participants. Thank you for making it possible to speak about our work to activists in the UK and Ireland.

How Did We Get Here? Part II – English Football At Large

Football and Capitalism have always been hand-in-hand, it is what made the Premier League a global brand. It's what drove the sanitisation of football in the early 90s, achieving what Margaret Thatcher couldn't and "taming the football hooligan". A more family friendly sport meant more sponsors willing to put their name to the product, more sponsors meant more money and the cycle continued.

As a result English football fans are generally less radical and conscious than their continental European counterparts.

This need for endless growth came to a head in April 2021, clubs formally put their name to a proposed breakaway league called the 'European Super League'. The biggest clubs on the continent wanted to break from their domestic shackles and join with their 'superclub' brethren, only that will make the line of growth go up more.

6 of the initial 12 proposed clubs were English, not really a surprise in itself – the Premier League was a global brand, the largest brand in club football. The owners of these clubs have little connection to the game outside of a private toy, a "project" or a "vision" – they were disconnected to what their respective fanbases thought and the fanbases weren't happy.

The following was a surprise, football fans took to the streets and exercised their right to yell at a stadium, they made witty placards, they wrote to sponsors, they chanted, they committed trespass, they threw things, they protested.



Outside of smaller, localised protests this hadn't really happened before in this country – the idea that football fans will get what they are given and they'll like it had been shattered in that instant.

And it worked, the European Super League didn't last a week.

The idea is shelved until the owners think they can get away with it next. Football fans had found their voice, all this talk of “Against Modern Football” and ideas like “Twenty's Plenty” and “Fan Ownership” was suddenly an option on the table.

Then What Happened?

Nothing. Football fans learned the power they could wield and did nothing with it. There's something very English about working together to get what you wanted, making real change and then going back to the thing you complain about as if there's nothing you can do to change it.

This brings us back neatly to Newcastle United, November 2021 and Newcastle's own LGBT+ fan group, ‘United with Pride’, leaves ‘Pride in Football’ [5], a network of similar groups, amidst the controversy of the Saudi takeover. Their initial statement [6] left a sour taste, in Saudi Arabia it is not only illegal to be LGBT+ but in some cases punishable by death.

[INTERVIEWER] – Are there any insurgent tactics you have learned that you believe would be useful information for those organising primarily in the UK and Ireland?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – We believe that the most important thing is to rely on the security of the partisans themselves. The best thing any of us can do is not to fall into the hands of the security services. Solidarity Zone is not a partisan group; we are defenders. We often see the mistaken tactics of partisans and those who take direct action [who are then arrested]. We do not cross paths with those who undertake the most successful actions, since they are able to hide from the security services and do not become defendants in criminal cases.

[INTERVIEWER] – And one for fun requested by a friend, do you have a mascot or animal that represents your group? :))

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – That's a cool question, since it's very therapeutic :)) Yes, it seems to me, we do have a mascot: a dog who accompanies two of our participants who are not anonymous, Anya Kurbatova and Ivan Astashin. The dog is named Grusha and our difficult conversations are often lightened by her photographs; she helps to ease the tension. In between reading accounts of torture, and of sentences to monstrous terms of imprisonment, it is very useful for our psychology to look at the silly positions that Grusha takes up to sleep in. [The dog is featured in the image for this article]

And another thing. On Signal, we often use a tiredness sticker: I would count that sticker as a mascot too.

We don't even have time for many of the things we need to do within the collective, or for raising sufficient funds. If we could prevent torture and other forms of harassment being used against those we defend, we would consider that an achievement in itself. Consequently, it seems to me, we have worked out a very good basic framework for our activity in these extreme circumstances: "Work. Security. Media." This is a straightforward formula that helps our initiative to exist. We support anti-war prisoners; we take care of our security; and we talk about this in the media. All this has been forced upon us. Of course we would like to have the possibility to do more for the prisoners and their families; to do more for our own mental health; and for the wider circulation of our ideas in the mass media. But so far we have not been able to.

[INTERVIEWER] — I know from my own experience with anarchist and leftist groups throughout the world, we are primarily populated by queer or transgender people, can you speak on this in a Russian context and what the experience is like on the ground for such individuals?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] — It is difficult for me to assess this, as I am not myself an LGBTQ+ person. Russian activism, like any other sphere, is full of queer and trans people, and this – among us, as in society as a whole – will not be taken away by the queerphobic and homophobic laws now being adopted by the government. We do not accept any type of discrimination, or any expression of discrimination. We fight all together, as always, against the main enemy – the repressive state. But in Russia it's much harder for queer and trans people, and this means that they have to expend more effort to take care of themselves and their communities.

United with Pride's statement that they "look forward to working with the new board members" was truly the epitome of the state of high-level English football.

'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'

Karl Marx

This hasn't all happened without some internal uproar, a section of Newcastle fans have decided to take a stand against what their club is becoming – a mouthpiece for a deadly regime. 'NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing' have staged protests on matchdays to draw attention to what their fellow supporters are supporting.

Their protests may be somewhat performative but in an industry of bodacious graphics and multi-language broadcasting that is sometimes what is required to be talked about. At least it's something.



The Rest of the Region

Newcastle United aren't the only club in the North-East though, so let's check in on how they're doing.

Sunderland AFC, in 2022 have been under investigation by The FA (English Football's governing body) over sectarian chanting about Derry born James McLean for the crime of not wearing a poppy on his shirt. McLean himself has given a detailed reason why he refuses to wear a symbol of British imperialism on his shirt [7] and the Royal British Legion themselves have defended his right to not wear one [8]. The crux of this issue isn't about 'not wearing a poppy', other players have not worn one either and got away without too much abuse, it wasn't even strictly old fashioned Anti-Irish racism as on the day of the sectarian abuse Sunderland fans held up a display to another Irish Catholic, Niall Quinn, a man looked upon with great respect by many Sunderland fans.

It's about British people having to come to terms that their nation wasn't "the good guys" in the action movie they perceive history to be.

Moving on to the other of the Big 3 clubs in the region, Middlesbrough FC. Middlesbrough have had a dedicated fan group for a bit longer than Newcastle and Sunderland and the 'Red Faction' as they are known are a bit more vocal about local politics.

In 2015 a banner at Middlesbrough's Riverside Stadium read "Save Our Steel", a rallying cry around the possible closure of the local steel mill in Redcar.

but right now that amounts to a minimal sum – less than 100 euros per month – for each of us.

[INTERVIEWER] – What are the end goals of your organisation? Both long term and short term, wide and limited scope, what do you wish to achieve?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – The main goal is to provide help and support to prisoners, who have by means of direct action taken a stand against Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine. These are people who firebomb military recruitment centres as a way to protest, who undertake diversionary tactics and sabotage on the railways – and also those falsely accused of such actions. These are people who obstruct the work of the military, the police and the FSB [Federal Security Service]. These are people who simply could not sit and calmly watch the way the world is changing around them; people whose friends and relatives are dying in the war; people who are driven to take radical action by feelings of hopelessness and mental torment.

In Russia, the life of political prisoners is shaped by horrific conditions of detention, constant breaches of prisoners' human rights, and torture and other pressure from the prison service. We try every day to do all that we can to ensure that the time political prisoners spend behind bars is as comfortable as it can be in Russian conditions. Ideally, of course, we want every one of those that we support not to be punished, but unfortunately that is practically impossible. So our aim now is to reduce the harm that the state does, and to support those who have paid with their freedom for their part in the struggle against the Russian military machine. It is difficult to answer this question further, since we don't have the privilege, the resources or the time to think about aims and work towards achieving them.

and not to forget about more direct forms of surveillance. This is full-time work, done on a voluntary basis, done in the time that we could spend on our own comforts, living our young lives and earning money. But the list of cases involving direct action – firebombings [of military recruitment centres and similar state premises], diversionary actions on the railways and sabotage – has grown so long that, while we cope with it, we are not so much living as surviving.

I do not personally know all the participants in our collective, because some of them work on an anonymous basis. But for most of us, this anti-war activism takes up all our free time and deprives us of opportunities to work for money as normal. This is a serious moral dilemma. I can speak for myself: my belief in anarchist ideals, in peace and mutual aid, prevents me from returning to ordinary paid work. I decided to quit work in a commercial company and to live in poverty, in order to make a contribution to the struggle against Putin's regime. That might sound romantic, like something out of a book from the last century about revolutionary movements – but actually it's a horrifying nightmare. I don't think a single one of us would fight under the present conditions by choice. Resistance is a reaction to the violence that surrounds us. Emotional exhaustion, physical tiredness and helplessness – it's difficult to romanticise these things. And it is pretty hard to romanticise the canned beans that one of my woman comrades – now in enforced political exile in another country, without the right legal documents – survives on for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

This is for us the most painful question: the lack of regular finance. All the money collected for prisoners is used for their defence in court, and to pay for items of clothing and food supplies for them in Russian prisons. The Solidarity Zone collective has its Patreon for donations to its participants' needs,

This was following a banner earlier in 2015, after Channel 4 aired 'Benefits Street' a "poverty porn" look at how people in Stockton-on-Tees get by having to rely on the bare minimum societal safety nets put in place. The banner read "Being Poor Is Not Entertainment".



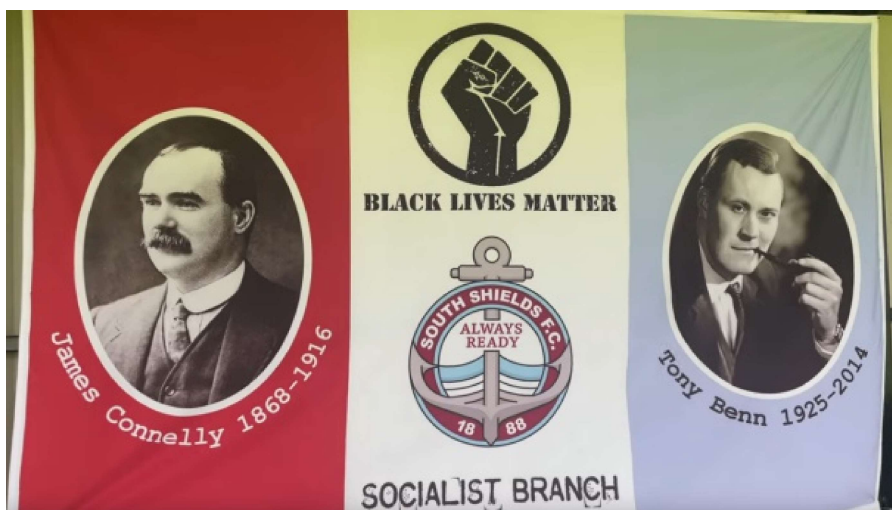
Since those days the group have reverted back to the cookie cutter fan group routine the others in the region find themselves in. Peacocking about local pride, working class routes, dead industries and past glories.

Jumpers for Goalposts

Non-League football is often romanticized as "proper football", "proper communities coming together" and "proper supporters". Like many things in the language around the game, these are often condescending platitudes in lieu of actual discussion. The lower reaches of the football pyramid does have a bit more in the way of old-fashioned 'community spirit' behind it though. These are clubs run by volunteers for the most part, clubs with

over 100 years of history whose worry is often keeping the lights on.

Here you get a wide array of clubs and people too multitudinal to really generalize but there's no Clapton CFC, Dulwich Hamlet, West Didsbury & Chorlton in the North-East. Your Shildon AFC, Darlington Railway Athletic and Heaton Stannington are just clubs; with small fanbases who have either grown up with it, know somebody in the squad or become disillusioned with the game higher up the pyramid. There are little things though. At Mariners Park, home of South Shields FC there is often a flag donning the faces of James Connelly and Tony Benn with the words "Socialist Branch".



These clubs will be affected most by the "Cost of Living Crisis" the government has bestowed upon us. Clubs have already canceled fixtures and discussed among themselves earlier kick off times to avoid having to use the floodlights. This is grassroots football and as such has grassroots worries about making it day to day.

[INTERVIEWER] – What groups are your organisation affiliated with?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – We work completely autonomously, but of course we are integrated with solidarity networks, and we participate in various off-line events in Europe. Right at the start, when we had no social media presence of our own, or even a name, we were given material support by the Anarchist Black Cross group in Moscow. Thanks to that, we could pay for lawyers in the initial cases we took on. We share our work practices, our security methods, and any successful experience in the courts, with a range of other anti-war and cyber-activist initiatives.

[INTERVIEWER] – Are you in Russian territory at this time?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – Right now, half of our collective is based in Russia, and half is in forced emigration, in countries of the European Union or former Soviet republics.

[INTERVIEWER] – What are the major barriers to organising in Russia, particularly with fundraising?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – The two biggest problems are: ensuring the safety of members of the Solidarity Zone collective, and the absence of any regular financial support. Unfortunately these two problems are closely linked to each other, and I'll allow myself to answer your question in a very emotional way. We undertake activism that puts us at considerable risk of imprisonment and persecution by the state. Apart from the day-to-day work with lawyers, anti-war prisoners and their families, we all need constantly to think of our own security: to ensure that our phones, notebooks and the information on them is protected,

Tales from Russia: An Interview with a member of Solidarity Zone

On the left, in the English speaking world, we so often say the phrase: “train good, car bad”, but we find that our friends in Russia courageously disagree. Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukraine war there have been many activists and fighters who sacrificed their liberty in the name of peace by attacking freight trains, military recruitment centres, and armoured vehicles among other things.

2 years in and this war is still happening and people are still giving up everything to defend autonomy. As we witness acts of genocide accelerate against Darfurians, Palestinianians, Armenians, and so many more, its important to recognise that injustice anywhere threatens peace everywhere.

Below is an interview conducted by a member of NEAG and the Northumbria branch of the IWW with a member of Solidarity Zone – a grassroots advocacy group supporting prisoners and other persecuted people who have taken steps to resist Russian imperialism.

[INTERVIEWER] – Firstly I suppose the best question is to ask what group or groups you are representing?

[SOLIDARITY ZONE MEMBER] – Hi! I am an anonymous participant of Solidarity Zone, the anarchist human rights defence initiative. We organise defence in court, and other types of support, for partisans and those arrested for anti-war direct action in Russia

What Now?

Football clubs are still focal points in their communities. The larger clubs have functioning food bank drives and “in the community” groups who run anything from football camps to talks about how drugs are for mugs. Football is largely a release from the weekday drudgery, it’s singing songs to nursery rhymes for 90 minutes, it’s meeting your mates in the pub to talk about work, it’s a gambling addiction nurtured by wall-to-wall betting company ads. It’s an escape when we need to face the facts of where we are.

This isn’t a rally cry for wider change nor is it a defeatist surrender of how the grass is greener elsewhere. This is an observation of where we are now. As the North-East is trying to find its voice and break out of its shell it’s up to us to decide what we want to do. Real change comes from the bottom, and that’s true of all things from football clubs to society.

The seeds are still there, they have always been there. In this “hotbed of football” lies a flower bed of ideas and like all ideas they need care to germinate

[1] UK: Saudi-backed bid for Newcastle United must prompt football ownership rule changes- <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-saudi-backed-bid-newcastle-united-must-prompt-football-ownership-rule-changes>

[2] English Premier League: Urgently Adopt Human Rights Policy- <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/23/english-premier-league-urgently-adopt-human-rights-policy>

[3] Revealed: 6,500 migrant workers have died in Qatar since World Cup awarded- <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/23/revealed-migrant-worker-deaths-qatar-fifa-world-cup-2022>

[4] Qatar 2022: What is Kafala?- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2koW6iiiNxc>

[5] Newcastle's LGBT+ fan group leaves wider Pride In Football network amid fallout from Saudi takeover – <https://theathletic.com/news/newcastles-lgbt-fan-group-leaves-wider-pride-in-football-network-amid-fallout-from-saudi-takeover/Gs49xMzw1XVK/>

[6] Our statement following the takeover of @NUFC – <https://twitter.com/UtdwithPride/status/1446430202947674113>

[7] James McClean issues open letter about his reasons for not wearing a poppy- <https://www.sportsjoe.ie/football/james-mcclean-issues-open-letter-about-why-he-isnt-wearing-a-poppy-1033>

[8] Royal British Legion stands by James McClean's right not to wear poppy- <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/royal-british-legion-stands-by-james-mcclean-s-right-not-to-wear-poppy-1.4488902>

as women, non-binary people, and trans people. All of us, together, speaking to each other without interference from men. I've already completely expanded my understanding of life itself, and definitely of the struggle, and of comradeship. I can only wish that for everybody else.

Thanks very much to Pamster for her time and dedication, and also to the long-suffering transcriber of this interview!

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[2]: <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2022/02/03/mala-jin-empowering-women-and-strengthening-society/>

[3]: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Triple_murder_of_Kurdish_activists_in_Paris

[4]: <https://performingborders.live/ejournal/hevalti-revolutionary-friendship-as-radical-care/>

[5]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78v91YSbMlg&t=99s>

[6]: <https://heyvasoruk.org>

it's also your role to model the kind of society you want to see, so you have to be a role model to people. Your actions have to align with what you believe in, so it's a process of figuring that out. In general, the concept of hevalti was just mind-blowing to me, because it was so sincere and beautiful. There was so much affection and love, and it was clear that you absolutely would treat somebody in a certain way, because they were a heval, that you wouldn't otherwise. It was a very specific relationship. Whereas I feel like the way that we use comradeship, it's not quite like that. I wish it was. I think the way we use comradeship, it's unclear to me, because I might have said the word, but I don't know if I could define it in such a deep sense as they do, as the Kurdish freedom movement does. I think our comradeship circles are basically just friendship circles.

I feel it's become almost meaningless in the context that I've experienced it in. Personally if I call somebody a comrade, I mean it very sincerely, but I feel more broadly in the activist scene I'm more familiar with, it's almost a leftist parody word at this point, almost Soviet. I love that sincerity that you're talking about, and the genuine love and care for one another, because that's what it comes down to, I think, or it should do, within activism. Do you have any final thoughts?

If you're in the UK, you can get involved with Kurdish Community Centres in London or Edinburgh. The Kurdish Red Moon (Heyva Sor) always need donations [6] – including for earthquake relief in affected areas. I think that everybody could benefit from engaging with the ideas of the Kurdish freedom movement, but also, I think it's intrinsically important for anybody that calls themselves an anarchist or a feminist to engage with global solidarity. We don't believe in borders anyway, so we should be reaching out and providing solidarity, and learning from each other. We should all be organising in autonomous spaces, as people oppressed by the patriarchy,

Rural Anarchism and Phone Boxes: case studies in mutual aid

[NOTE ON THE TEXT: This article is a combination of two articles written by the same author, both of the articles below have appeared elsewhere separately, but they are appearing together for the first time here]

The loneliness of the small-town Ancom

It's not easy being a small-town Ancom. Often you'll find that the farmers in your local are more interested in getting lambing season out of the way than listening to your repeated lectures about Bookchin. Even if your approach is somewhat more practical, there can be issues involved when it comes to praxis. Chain yourself to the railings by all means, but you're in with a good chance of discovering that your arresting officer lives three doors down, goes to the same pub as you, and is the brother of a local councillor, and that suddenly it's very difficult to get help with housing, allotments or even replies to your emails.

Being in a community in which there's one or two degrees of separation between everyone, but in which it's not literally true that everyone knows everyone, comes with some notable downsides. It's simpler to just associate people with what you see them doing, and that's the label they end up with. There's the Plant Lady. There's the Man Who Runs The Ice Cream Shop. And, in some towns, there's the Resident Radical Who Won't Shut Up About Communism. And because it's taken as re(a)d (pun absolutely intended) that the Resident Radical will, in fact, talk quite a lot about communism, it's seen as just 'their thing'. You don't stand a strong chance of changing individual

viewpoints by lecturing people, let alone the status quo.

I'd argue, though, that there is a kind of radicalism in small towns, one that you might not experience to the same degree in urban settings. When I set up a mutual aid group at the start of the pandemic, I'd envisaged the same set-up as what I'd seen being done in the cities, namely that somebody's appointed to look after each street and make sure everyone was having their shopping done if they couldn't go themselves. But broadly speaking, this happened automatically, and it happened because of the fact that everyone vaguely knows everyone in our community. Where help was needed, it was required because people couldn't afford food in the first place, but that's an issue imposed on us from the top down, and it's something people face regardless of where they live. So the mutual aid group instead concentrated on setting up and running a free community larder, which is still operational to this day.

It can be easy to malign smaller communities and to act on the assumption that they're inherently less radical than urban ones, but I think this is an oversimplification. A different approach is called for, and it's one that is anything but top-down. Don't lecture the farmers about Bookchin. Listen to them talk about their work. Don't ascribe political views to them that they may not hold, and take account of the challenges they're facing. Just as importantly, don't assume that they're unable to grasp political theory or that they're uninterested in it, or that your mention of anarchism is the first time they're hearing about it.

Seeing rural communities as a blank canvas, ready for you to paint black and red, mightn't be the best approach. There are reasons people may be reluctant to nail their colours to the political mast, and it isn't always lack of political conviction.

but when it comes to those conversations where people change their minds, I think it's so difficult online.

Yes, I would agree with that, definitely. One of the reasons that I ended up joining the North-East Anarchist Group was because they didn't want anything from me, they were just nice to me. Their attitude wasn't, "Now you have to join our group, now you have to come to a meeting", but ironically, and to their continued horror, that was the group I ended up joining.

Yes, I think that's such a good example. Just how much it pays to care for each other. I think that comes back to the idea of comradeship, actually.

My idea of the distinction between a comrade and a friend was, "A friend's concerned about you if you're arrested on a protest, but a comrade comes to meet you at the police station". You can be both a friend and a comrade, but if somebody is in your group, that is your comrade, even if you don't like them, even if you don't know them. If they're experiencing misogyny, you should stick up for them, whether or not you even like that person. You mentioned that there's a word for both 'comrade' and 'friend', so everybody gets addressed as 'comrade'. Could you explain how this works?

The important thing is their concept of hevalti [4]. The political allegiance you have to each other, and the bonds of trust, are really, really strong and important. The idea is not that you have to get along even when you don't like each other, the idea is that you have to radically love all your comrades. Also, they have a concept of Tekmil [5], which is the critique and self-critique process. You hold each other accountable, and basically help each other's personal development of a militant personality, through criticising each other in constructive ways. As people that are in the movement,

I think it's that balance between having a script, agreeing on some principles, being able to basically give the same answer across different geographical locations, but also, holding a debate, holding a conversation, seeing people in their full, human selves, their full lives, genuinely caring about finding out what they care about, and establishing a genuine connection, genuine care, and also comradeship. It's about a balance between those two. Actually, I will mention somebody called Sakine Cansiz [3]. Sara was one of the founders of the Kurdish women's movement. She was assassinated in Paris in 2013, a targeted shooting of her and two other Kurdish organisers. In the autobiography she talks about how she was politicised by somebody coming into her home and talking to her. She was really impressed by how she wasn't being recruited. The person wouldn't say, "And now you come to a meeting". They wouldn't even name-drop any organisation. They would just talk. And she thought, "I didn't know I had a Kurdish identity. I didn't know my own history. I didn't know about my language. I didn't realise it was repressed". She went on to organise a reading group with some of her classmates, and they would take it really seriously, sit down and find out about different political ideologies and stuff like that. These conversations you have, they're not instrumental. They're not with a goal of making somebody come to a meeting. They're genuinely about changing people's perspectives in a holistic sense. That's what's different even from something like the door-knocking of a tenants' union, where I don't think the problem is having a script, but instead maybe the deeper foundations of the group itself. Is the goal really revolutionary? Is everybody on the same page? All of this is just not dealing with the real roots of issues, and the real conversations that we need to have with real people. Especially face-to-face. I think that could make such a big difference. I think the internet also plays a very important role in organising. The internet's an amazing tool for coming together,

So what is the best approach? At the risk of oversimplifying, I would say that going out and helping your communities is the way forward. I find it's more effective to avoid words like communism, anarchism, and even anarcho-syndicalism entirely, but rather to lead by example and let people come to these conclusions, or conclusions very close to them, on their own.

Look at what's there in your community, and meet people where you find them. Many if not most small towns have a food bank these days – just another thing we can thank the government for – and not all those running these food banks will be communists. In fact, most of them won't be. They might not even be anti-capitalists. But they are decent people doing good work, and in joining them, you are in no way compromising your anti-capitalist principles; in fact, you are demonstrating why you have them in the first place.

[NOTE ON THE TEXT: Based off the above article and the author's experience, next is a practical guide to starting a mutual aid phone box, something they did in their local rural community]

Phone box ladders, a practical guide

Members of NEAG and other comrades have been setting up mutual aid ladders around the north-east of England. Here's how you can do the same!

YOU WILL NEED:

- A phone box, ideally one with a door still attached, ideally close to shops
- Some food to start off with
- Some shelves
- Some signs explaining what all this is, blu tack/tape

YOU MIGHT NEED:

- A bike lock
- Hand sanitiser
- A whiteboard and marker pens for mutual aid requests

What is this?

A community ladder inside a phonebox, that works along the basic principle of 'take what you need, leave what you can'.

Setting up:

Try and look like you're supposed to be there. Wear hi-vis if necessary, pick a time when there are fewer passers-by (early morning works). Same principle as ad hacking.

Phone boxes are owned by BT so there's no need to deal with local authorities. BT were willing to grant permission in early lockdown but are currently much less open to this kind of thing.

The reality is, we don't have that role in our movements here, in any meaningful sense. I think it's an interesting question for us. What would it look like to have that space for people to dedicate their lives to organising? It's going to be different, but is it possible? Is it necessary? I do think it's necessary, because they just support people to organise without everybody having to learn from scratch every time. They can come into a community and already have knowledge, and just be there to answer questions, to give advice. It's not an unproblematic position. They're not supposed to be in positions of power, for example. They wouldn't actually chair the commune, but they just don't have to think of anything else and it frees up their time too. And the historical narrative I've been told about how Rojava became so politically organised is that, for decades, cadres from the Kurdish freedom movement went literally door-to-door and spoke to people, and found out what they cared about, what their lives were like, and offered this perspective of a better society and a free society. Also, it's different because, in Syria, it's not uncommon to have an uninvited guest, and the culture of hospitality is so great that you would just take people in and chat to them. Here, we barely say hi on the street, so that's another contextual difference to consider, but because of that, they managed to have real human connection and conversation, and it's about convincing people as well. It's a whole art of bringing people in. It was through decades of that that the movement that exists there now exists.

I've experienced the door-to-door organising tactic in tenants' unions in the UK. But I don't know what kind of knock-on effect that has, because it's not really a dialogue. We were told what to say to people when we were door-knocking. There was a whole script, and that's not the same as a dialogue.

I just genuinely feel a lot of pain around the way that the potentiality of coming together under the feminist banner, or under the banner of being all oppressed by the same system of patriarchy, and being at the bottom of that oppression, is being hijacked and taken away from us by transphobes. I saw what this potential looks like when it's pursued, and it's so strong. I really believe this is why a lot of revolutions fail, or movements fail, because they are really patriarchal and really sexist, and women are often the strongest, the bravest, the most knowledgeable organisers, with all of the barriers that are in their way. Why not centre them in any kind of movement? Those who benefit from the Posie Parker protests that have been happening are ultimately the state and the patriarchy. The transphobes themselves are not really winning at this. They're very clearly not creating a community of feminists and of women supporting each other. They're also partaking in forms of oppression. They're not creating a better world.

The mutual aid networks that suddenly became a thing when Covid-19 started gave me some hope. My group still exists, but organisationally it was only ever me, and I don't know to what extent these groups born out of crisis ever did work along lines that we can be uncritical of. They were a piecemeal solution at best, but I think it's still significant that this happened here, straight away, and that we drew on the same principle.

Yes, I think moments of crisis can be moments of opportunity, though. I think, if there's a vacuum of power and you already have an organised movement, you can seize it. The pandemic could've been one of those moments, if we had been organised. In the Kurdish freedom movement, for example, they have cadres whose full-time activity is to organise the revolution. They get supported by the movement in that they don't have any other job, they don't have romantic relationships, their entire life is just dedicated to service.

In unrelated news, it's often easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. And also to not ask for forgiveness from corporations.

Signs and advertising:

Best to keep signs short and simple, emphasising that the food's for everyone and that there's no limit on what people can take.

We contacted the local press as soon as we were set up. This was to make it far harder for the council to shut us down, because then they'd look like the bad guys. We also have a Facebook page and use Twitter sometimes.

Shelves:

It's often better to keep non-food items on the lower shelves because of rodent risk, keep an eye on any uncovered/open boxes of food and try not to leave overnight. Good idea to label shelves. It can also be good to secure the shelves to the kiosk itself with a bike lock – this can be a major challenge. IKEA have great sized metal shelves that fit in the classic red phone boxes.

Maintenance:

Set up a cleaning rota to make sure it stays tidy (provide hand sanitiser, masks, etc.). Wipe down handle/surfaces. Check use-by dates, chuck out anything unsuitable. It's good to be seen doing maintenance too, it adds to your legitimacy.

If you see cops hanging round the phonebox as you approach to do maintenance...wait till they've gone! They're not going to do anything to help and can only limit you.

Funding and keeping the larder stocked:

We use Open Collective, which lets you upload the receipt and you get reimbursed within a week or two. Everyone (donor or not) can see what you've spent the money on and how much money you currently have, although Open Collective do take a small cut.

We also use TooGoodToGo – this is an app for gentrified dumpster diving where you pay a small amount to get supermarket/restaurant surplus.

Where can these beautiful phone boxes be found so far?

Community larders in phone boxes can be found in many places, including Newcastle, Durham

Have any questions or feedback?

You can contact either Northumbria IWW (northumbria@iww.org.uk) or North East Anarchist Group (neanarchistgroup@protonmail.com), you can also find them on twitter @NorthumbriaIWW and @NEAnarchoGroup!

“Oh, I just don't know about your politics. I don't care”.

I think the transphobe movement is a huge danger to feminist solidarity in the UK. It's a big wedge, and it's something I was reflecting on when I was in Rojava too, because it's just such a big problem that this is the centre of our debates all the time. Of course we need to give an answer to right-wing, fascist women using feminism to hide their bigotry and transphobia, but then we also need to organise as feminists, and as trans feminists and as queer feminists, for a feminist revolution. Instead of having that conversation about, “What is the positive, alternative, counter-oppressive world that we want to see about, and how do we get there?”, we're pushed into a corner by transphobes to just talk about how we counter them. That's a lot of energy and time, and it makes me question whether it's well spent, and how we centre our solidarity first. If that's strong enough, then that's also a way to counter the transphobes, but I just feel like they're taking up too much space in our own minds. Yes, they're very loud in the media, in ways that we can't always control, because the media is corrupt and right-wing, but there are always the parts that you can control, like how you come together to organise in DIY and grassroots ways. The transphobic ideology has hijacked even our thinking about womanhood itself, and about women's solidarity. Trans women are not a threat to that. Radical trans feminists have been at the front of every feminist struggle.

I agree with you, but I also think, from the standpoint of solidarity, that's why the transphobes take up so much space in my head, because as I see it, trans people are under attack, and it's our duty to stand with them against this growing movement that is also incorporating fascists quite happily. When I join a new feminist group, my first thought is, “I need to make sure they're not transphobic”, and that's not a good way of thinking, but also, you do have to think it.

Even within an anarchist context, you can get the same kind of rhetoric. “We need to focus on the real issues”, and, of course, the macho culture that you get in a lot of anti-fascist circles. You’re often made to feel like you’re not good enough, or that you’re a side issue because you’re a woman. I’ve heard anarchists talk about idpol in disparaging terms and always think, “That’s easy enough for you to say, if you’re not one of the identities that’s under attack”.

A lot of people there would say, “When I’m organising, my identity as a woman always comes first. That’s my first identity. Secondly, I’m part of this group, or I’m part of this party, or this is my political ideology, but firstly, I’m always a woman, and that’s why, whatever happens, I will always stand with any woman that is oppressed here, beyond anything else”. That just changes the dynamic, so much, and this is where the identities can become a source of fragmentation in our own movements, where it becomes too much about the specifics of everybody’s individual position, rather than what we have in common. We don’t focus on what we have in common, or even who our common enemy is. We need to define that, and then we can, I think, more efficiently organise against this enemy.

The only group I’ve personally comes across who has this idea of, “Oh, but we’re all women, and everything else is secondary”, is unfortunately, feminism-appropriating transphobes. Obviously, I’m not saying that this is an inherently transphobic belief, this is just that that’s only time I’ve ever heard that.

Do you think that’s really what brings them together?

In reality? No. I think it’s a middle-class moral panic. I don’t think it’s actual solidarity with women by any means, but that is the line that they use all the time, and that’s how they justify letting Nazis in, because it’s all,

Poems from a Prisoner

As a group, we try to run a regular prisoner writing session once a month. Writing to prisoners is a vital task for any group of anarchists. They are on the inside for us, so we must be on the outside for them, continuing our collective struggle and showing them solidarity – reminding them that they are not alone. Prison is a brutal place, and this is by design, so sending a letter or a postcard to a prisoner can mean a great deal.

One of our members has been exchanging letters for a little while with Ryan Roberts, currently serving 14 years in prison for helping to defend our right to protest during the Kill the Bill demonstrations a few years back. During these exchanges, Ryan chose to share two poems they had written whilst in prison. With their permission, we are sharing these poems here with you all. We have also produced a zine with these poems included – so keep an eye out at our future stalls to grab yourself one!

If you wish to write to Ryan, their details are here, with a big thanks to Bristol Anarchist Black Cross for keeping their prisoner list so up to date:

Ryan Roberts A5155EM, HMP Swaleside, Brabazon Rd, Eastchurch, Isle of Sheppey ME12 4AX

If you want to join us at a prisoner writing session, please do keep an eye on our social media for when we advertise them! Alternatively, you can always email us to get involved with us as a group and to help us organise such events!

Till every prison burns, and no one lives in a cage...

Poem 1 – Community!

Community is an area we are all in.

Not just a label given by Councils or government within.

It's about coming together, barriers no one can break.

Building common foundations. Identities no one can take.

Bonds are created through unity, resilience formed so strong,
ensuring we combine to identify where we belong.

Accepting diversity allows a common ground.

Age, gender, religion, no one will beat us down.

Becoming one allowing care and consideration, in facing trials
and tribulations, bringing everyone elation.

Life experiences share, give guidance and direction.

Not able to be bought or sold, only open to perception.

Our community is our belief a future we all want.

Working with a purpose to bring us together.

That's our community no one can beat.

That's how misogyny works as well, pitting women against each other, even sometimes across the world, who actually have the same interests and same values, and the same oppression, to some extent. I think that's also why the context of crisis and of not being able to have a comfortable life helps having the sense of community, but it's also born out of decades of organising from the Kurdish freedom movement, against the colonisation of the fascist Turkish state, and other fascist forces. Even though our oppression may not be that visible, in terms of having a war, that war is related to our context, because it's just an outsourcing of the tensions and the realities that we live in, which is, these huge organisations and NGOs and states that are consolidating their own power through exploiting people and disregarding human life. I think the bribe of the system, for us, is that we can have a comfortable life, get a job, maybe even have some sense of romantic achievement, and then that being it, and that being fulfilling. But that's an illusion, and this is why I believe that struggle is life, even if, maybe, it makes my life more difficult in a superficial sense, because that's also what makes my life worth living.

It was so amazing and inspiring to see that they have so many forces against them all at the same time, and instead of saying, "I guess we'll make society better later. Right now, we don't have time, we have to focus on only physical self-defence", they say, "No, we'll do it all at once now. We might have to put some things on pause, some things will be really slow, but we're not going to give up any part of these values, because we do not want to repeat the logic of the oppressor, because we know what it's like to be oppressed. Why would we do it to somebody else?".

and a real community, because you can always go back to that, even after a tough conversation, and get reassurance, solidarity, and a sense of belonging or direction. Whereas I feel like, often, when I'm trying to have these conversations with people and they don't go well, I have nowhere to recharge, necessarily. It still feels quite like a solitary, individual pursuit.

I was thinking about the Western discourse around ISIS brides, and the level of vitriol and hatred people have for 15-year-old girls who were groomed, essentially; clearly a very carceral mentality. Then again, saying that I've sometimes wanted to give up activism because of men has made me realise that I have the luxury of that option. I can opt out, whereas there's a lot more reasons for a community to want restorative justice when they can't opt out, they can't just have a normal life like I can. I can also understand why I want to resort to a catapult for some leftist men, but...

I understand why you want a catapult too.

But I also completely agree with you about how it can be really isolating when you don't have a women's collective behind you, because you have nobody to go to, and it's very easy for concerns to just be brushed off, and then you feel like you're the angry feminist the whole time, you're the only one, even if a lot of people agree with you. For some reason, we don't have that same collective spirit. Maybe the difference is because, in their case, it was born out of war.

No, I think the difference is that we are very entrenched in liberal capitalist mentality. Even if you disagree with capitalism at a systemic level, we may not be dealing with the ways in which it's impacted our mentality. It's always going to be individualising us and moving us further into our own little groups and pitting us against each other.

Poem 2 - Without Prejudice

Do not condemn me for all that I do.

Fundamentally, I am the same as you.

Do not intrude upon my thoughts.

Or in the trap of prejudice you will be caught.

In every life mistakes occur.

In that I'm just like him or her.

I'm paying the price for what I have done.

Once I'm out let it be gone.

Don't hound me forever for one misdeed.

Allow me truly to be free.

Burn me not with the prison brand.

Let me go and simply shake my hand.

I am not just the things I have done.

Like you I am a mother's son.

All I want is a chance to be free.

You have no idea how much that means to me.

Lessons from Rojava: An Interview with Pamster

Below is an interview of Pamster conducted by Capybarbara, a member of NEAG and Northumbria IWW. Thanks is given to the transcriber of this interview, a close friend of Capybarbara.

Hello! Who are you?

My name's Pamster, I use she/they pronouns, and I've been active in anarcha-feminist organising, as well as women's groups. I recently went to North and East Syria, as part of a women's delegation from Scottish Solidarity With Kurdistan to meet the women's groups and structures over there and specifically to learn about the autonomous women's structures. I wanted to go because it's relevant to my organising and the context here – I wanted to figure out how to resist capitalism and neoliberalism, and the patriarchy, and also fascism, all at once. This is what's been happening in Rojava since the revolution started in 2012, and is still ongoing. The region is now under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. They fought off ISIS in most territories and ever since then, they've been implementing an experiment in self-organising, self-determination and autonomy through the system of democratic confederalism. There are three key pillars, which are direct grassroots democracy, ecology, and the women's revolution. I was particularly interested in the women's liberation side of it, because even though it might be talked about as part of the revolution in Rojava, it's not often focused on in the amount of depth that I think it deserves. That is the main thing that I actually wanted to learn about, and I haven't found a way to do so from the UK, so it was amazing to go and just speak to women directly.

When we were in Raqqa, we passed a central square where they used to display beheaded bodies. Now, the square has been rebuilt with a sign saying Jin, Jiyan, Azadi or Women, Life, Freedom which is obviously a very symbolic, amazing gesture. Again, the change doesn't happen just because you rename the square. Change happens at a level of all society. The way the Autonomous Administration deals with ISIS basically shows their approach to justice as not being about punishment, and while they still have prisons, these are seen as a last resort. The first resort is always the community. They have a commission, the Women's House or Mala Jin [2], and they deal with all kinds of domestic issues, always keeping the interests of the woman in mind.

Another point was that the approach very much just moves at the speed at which people can move at. It's never going to work to impose any kind of ideas on people, so if they liberate a place, they're not going to ban the use of the niqab, which was mandatory in places that ISIS occupied. They're not going to then respond to that by saying, "Now it's banned, because that's how we'll liberate women". It's about slowly figuring out ways to bring them into organising, and show them how they can self-organise, how they can organise their own community. That's a very different approach from sitting somebody down and saying, "Liberation means that you, right now, tell me explicitly that women are equal, and they're good organisers, and they're just as good comrades as men, and then we'll work together". That's not the first step. The first step is working with contradictions, and having really uncomfortable conversations.

Nobody changes their mind overnight, do they? It's a process, and I suppose that comes back to the "resistance is life" concept.

Also, it's a process that works only if you have a real collective,

It's like the basic principle behind trade union organising, isn't it? The idea that you can't stand up to your boss as an individual, but if we have a lot of individuals, they make up a union.

Actually, the IWW was another organisation that I was reminded of while I was there, because of their focus on one big union for all workers.

I wanted to ask about restorative justice. I struggle with the idea of restorative justice sometimes, because if the perpetrator doesn't acknowledge that they've done real damage, you've fallen at the first hurdle. In my experience, that's happened all of the time, and it's really, really dispiriting and made me consider leaving activism.

I've had the same experience of trying to deal with injustices with movements here, in terms of people not listening and getting very disillusioned in the capacity of leftist men to change. But this is where I think making each other stay hopeful and developing culture and aesthetics actually is an answer to this too. Firstly, a big thing in Rojava is that they even believe in the rehabilitation of ISIS fighters.

The resources are really, really tight and that's why it's a very dangerous place, but then the ideological tensions are so strong that there's politically motivated violence too. Their approach was that they needed work with society, and that includes everybody that is still under the ISIS ideology – all of the women that are still oppressed within ISIS families. But they don't see them as disposable or inherently bad.

They're trying to find ways to work with them, to rehabilitate, even in the case of people who have been instrumental in really inhumane crimes.

You mentioned it was an experiment. Do they see it as an experiment?

Yes, that was the word that they used – across the board – to highlight how it wasn't ever finished. There was no endpoint where you could say, "I've done it, now it's perfect, it's great". Everything needs to be questioned and negotiated, but also, it just hasn't really been done before. They want to tackle problems at the root, which includes very deep reflection and long-term processes of change. I think it's also important to acknowledge that it's not even going to happen within one lifetime, and that's okay, but we can all participate in the trying and the effort and the struggle.

It seems to mirror this idea of changing yourself as an individual, and the ongoing process of trying to overcome learnt biases on that level. Is that a fair comparison?

Yes, that's a very, very central concept as well in the Kurdish freedom movement and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in general. When I was there, there were so many points where I was thinking, "It's incredible that you arrived at that conclusion, because I have too, in a different corner of the world, working with different theories, different concepts, but somehow, we're both actually thinking about freedom in a similar way". Even though I always felt like the ideology there is far more developed, concrete, practical, put into action, and also more intellectually thought-through compared with what I was trying to piece together from bits of anarchist and feminist theory that I know from a mostly Western context, which just never felt close to approximating the notion of freedom that I intuitively felt like I wanted. Here, when I say something, I often feel like I have to always be ready to defend it immediately, even within leftist circles, because maybe I'm in a room that is full of...

Men.

Men, and what I'm saying is too feminist for them. But then, with feminists, sometimes they can be quite liberal, and not the kind of radical and anarchist and revolutionary feminism that I believe in. So I feel like they might not want to talk about capitalism in the way that I want to. When I was in Rojava, I had that feeling far less. I would say things that, here, would be so controversial, and people would just nod and go, "Of course. Of course we believe this. Of course the oppressions are interconnected, the only question is, how? Of course we want a revolution". Then, you can just focus your time on figuring out the methods.

Instead of getting caught up in constant theoretical fighting, all the time.

Yes. And this internal change is a huge concept. They actually see the change as an individual to be really foundational to changing society. There's a saying that's something like, "98% of the change is within yourself". People would often say that 98% or 99% of the struggle is within yourself, and if you can figure that out, then you can go into interactions in a determined way, and change people's minds, and create a movement. It's the idea of personal self-development, which includes developing a militant, revolutionary personality.

Is that connected to the "kill the dominant male" quote you mentioned to me?

Yes, that booklet is really good, it's titled 'Killing and Transforming the Dominant Man'[1].

It's difficult to say what real impact it's having, because, again, it's about that long-term social change that's not going to happen immediately. It's difficult to quantify what is going on after the educations, but that is the strategy that they're going for. When we were there, the men were asked, "Do you have anything to say to our delegation?", and one man rose from his chair and said, "Yes. I would like to say that women's liberation is key to the liberation of all society". It was quite emotional.

My personal stance as an activist was always, "It's absolutely not my job to teach men", but listening to you, it seems to be about the result. I'd be a lot more inclined to teach men if they were actually learning.

Yes. I think the key difference between the way in which we might be interacting with leftist men and trying to teach them about being more anti-patriarchal in their organising, and the way in which the Kurdish women's movement does it, is that their approach is always collective.

It's never a woman just speaking to one of her friends, or even two women trying to get a whole group of a few dozen people to change their activities. It's always based in a group identity, and in collective action, so those younger women that might be leading the educations, they might not have power within their home, to stand up to their dad, but their dad might be at the education, and has to listen to them in that context, even if it's just for a few hours, because they have the strength of the whole women's movement behind them, and that's very different. Even if they might be saying the same things over and over, and they might not change the behaviour of the men immediately, they do build their own power, and they do make the point that the only way the men can learn what it's actually like to be oppressed as a woman is from the people that are oppressed.

Obviously this trip only being open to women obviously was a big plus for you.

Yes, I think it's also about: what opportunities are you not afforded because of patriarchy? Men who go to North and East Syria would not be in the same autonomous women's spaces we visited in the same way, or at all. There was a clear link that I had with so many of the women, about us both being women's organisers. That was the link. The link wasn't even my anti-capitalist organising or my anarchist organising, it was actually our shared identity and our shared oppression experiences. That's part of the reason why those autonomous spaces exist, because you can get a different kind of conversation and comradeship when the Man is not in the room. But also, you can then start to work on your own militant personality, and try and transform the dominant man in your own head, and the patriarchal aspects that we've all internalised – without it being used against you in some kind of power struggle with men.

Are the men in the movement challenged to overcome their own prejudices about women, and if so, who's doing that challenging? Is it other men telling them, "Overcome your misogyny"?

So they see this as the role of the women, to educate the men about women's oppression. Ideally, men would also challenge each other, and we actually saw one of the men's educations, where they have mini-lectures that are led by women from the movement. The one we saw was actually a teenage girl, I think as young as 14, along with adult women from the movement, and they were at the front of the class, and they were showing a video that's essentially about feminism and the history of women. Then they have a discussion with the men around the ideas of "What does it mean to be a free man? What does it mean to support women in organising?"

I was going to ask about religion. How does that come into play? Is that seen as something to be overcome?

I think, at least from what I saw, it's part of the project. It's part of the society that they want to build, or not build, but still part of the process. One of their key values is ethnic plurality, and also plurality of religion, and people living harmoniously together on the land that they might have had cause to be divided on. The divisions are all created by the state, to suit its purposes and create its power, but they're artificial, and there's nothing inherently contradictory between the Muslim people and the Assyrian Christians who also live in North and East Syria. The goal is for them is to live together in peace. The goal is peace in general; nobody wants war, and women especially will never want war, because they are disproportionately affected by it due to misogyny, and also due to their children dying and all of that associated pain.

And what did you and your delegation learn about feminist solidarity while you were over?

I think that people's openness and determination in their own vision and identity and comradeship was really incredible to see. They had a united ideology that they would come back to. We went from city to city, from Qamishli to Raqqa, and Kobane, we traveled around so much in a very short period of time, and everywhere, people would say the same thing; they would have the same goals, they would have the same methods. Obviously, that's because there's a line, but it's also because people are very educated about their own history, and about history in general. We would often be told that the "21st century is the century of the women's revolution", and they would see women as a united group across the world. It was the sense of, "We're doing this here, and that's great, but ultimately, this is what we want for every woman in the entire world."

We want every woman to be liberated”. I remember when we were in Raqqa, we would ask what kind of message the women’s groups we met would like us to bring back. We met with this group called Zenobiya Women’s Community that was recently set up. And we asked them, “What kind of message would you like us to bring back?” Most groups when asked this would talk about the need for international help, in terms of the very practical problems they’re dealing with. Those are directly linked to the arms trade worldwide, and to government officials not recognizing the region as an autonomous region of Syria. But in Raqqa, they actually said, “Our message to you is that we have solidarity with your struggle”. And we’re sitting in a room for that meeting where pictures of the martyrs from the same organisation are on the wall. A few months ago, some of them died, and there’s somebody in the room that filled in that role, despite the huge danger of falling themselves. But it’s worth it, because your life is a struggle, and that’s a common slogan there too: Berxwedan Jiyane. Resistance is Life.

That’s beautiful.

They think of it so internationally, and everything is connected. In a way it’s so simple, and less fragmented.

Yes. It’s simple, but that’s the heart of what solidarity is. It’s meant to be mutual, isn’t it? It’s not about Westerners hopping onto a cause with a “white saviour complex”. Another thing I wanted to ask about the aesthetics of the revolution. When we discussed it, you mentioned that they put a lot of thought into these aesthetics. Is that something that you’ve ever experienced elsewhere? My impression is that it’s not something that’s discussed over here.

I think Northumbria IWW is truly carrying on the spirit with the capybara memes. But overall I think it is lacking in our

movements, apart from your heroic contributions, of course. I do think that we are lacking not just the aesthetics, but the culture. The Kurdish women’s movement focuses on both. There is a women’s culture, an entire commission for that, and they’re looking at what women’s history has been erased or not covered enough. What is women’s music, what is the heritage of women in Mesopotamia? Also, what is the culture of the revolution, of the movement? They have so much amazing Kurdish folk music, groups, circle dances, guerrilla dances, and they’re always thinking about this idea of, “How do we keep morale up? How do we keep our hopes up?”.

I was thinking about riot grrrl a lot when I was there: I’m in a riot grrrl band, and it’s perhaps a bit niche, but it’s very close to my heart and to my journey through life. It’s feminist punk that focuses on women, nonbinary people, queer people and trans people, and other people that have been oppressed on the basis of their gender, and might not have felt like they could be musicians, who then find a home in riot grrrl culture.

Yes, it’s the same principle. That’s an interesting link.

That’s how I felt, and it’s also not based on skill. “Just try it”, it’s very DIY. They have a whole TV channel that’s just about reporting on women’s organising, and other channels reporting on the Autonomous Administration in general. We went to a mixed TV station, but 70% of the workers were still women, and they were all sharing the roles; so they would rotate who’s the presenter, who’s doing the montage, who’s doing the sound tech side. They would all learn the skills and then teach them to each other. That’s very similar to my riot grrrl, queer punk, feminist community, where we do have classes where we teach each other how to play bass from scratch, and then we form different bands in different configurations, and the ultimate goal is for the sound engineer to also not be a man’s job.