Permanent Revolution and Kurdistan

Free Öcalan! Defend the PKK!

The following is an edited and abridged translation of an article originally published as a 24 February supplement to Bolschewik, *journal of Gruppe Spartakus, German section of the IBT.*

Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), was captured on 15 February by agents of the Turkish secret service who greeted him with the cynical words, "Welcome home, you are now our guest." One thing that Öcalan, Turkey's Public Enemy No. 1, can be certain of is the deadly hostility of his military "hosts" who have made no pretense of "fairness." Immediately after Öcalan was snatched in Kenya, his Turkish lawyer was arrested and members of his international legal team were turned away at the border, and hundreds of members of the only remaining legal pro-Kurdish party, Hadep, were imprisoned. The international left and workers' movement, particularly in Germany and Turkey, must take up the struggle to defend Öcalan and all other Kurdish activists. We therefore agree with the PKK that "demonstrations, rallies and occupations must take place with the aim of saving the life of the chairman of the PKK" (MED TV News, 16 February).

The successful defense of Öcalan, and the PKK as a whole, against the judicial systems of both Turkey and Germany requires, above all, the kind of massive working-class action which can threaten the bourgeois social order. Leftists and class-conscious workers in Germany must actively defend the Kurdish resistance. The case of Öcalan, and the numerous other PKK militants who are now threatened with arrest and deportation, is clearly a situation where "an injury to one is an injury to all!"

The Kurds' justified protests against their Turkish oppressors (and German collaborators) have been met by a campaign aimed at abolishing dual citizenship and strengthening anti-democratic laws. Both government and opposition politicians, as well as the corporate media, are involved in this vicious crusade. After the bloody massacre of Kurds at the Israeli embassy in Berlin, fundamental democratic rights were suspended as authorities banned all demonstrations in the city. Chancellor Schröder and Home Secretary Schily declare that "we" Germans must not permit conflicts on "our" streets which are not "ours" and, further, that "we" should crack down hard on Kurdish protesters, including considering using fast-track deportations. This cynical nationalist propaganda threatens the welfare and even the lives of Kurdish activists.

In recent years, the German state has directly participated in conflicts in Turkey. It banned the international Musa Anter peace train to Diyarbakir in 1997, suppressed *Kurtulus* (a newspaper critical of the Turkish regime) and conducted a brutal raid on the Anadolu publishing company in Cologne. Germany has politically supported all the oppressive measures undertaken by its NATO partner in Ankara while continuing to supply arms to the Turkish military. German imperialism is already a party to this conflict and an enemy of those who stand for the liberation of Kurdish and Turkish workers and peasants! It is sheer hypocrisy for Schröder et al to make a distinction between "their" conflicts and "ours" because the struggle has

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Kurdish demonstrators in Germany defend Öcalan

reached German streets and involves German police—as if the German state is in the habit of tolerating internal class struggle! The ruling class routinely responds to resistance against oppression "with adequate force." In 1997, when students protesting education cuts entered the inviolable precincts of parliament, they were attacked by mounted police; when angry miners protesting mass redundancies occupied the motorway, they were threatened with charges of breaching the peace; at recent anti-fascist demonstrations many leftists have been arrested. The point is not to counterpose "their" Kurdish/Turkish conflicts to "our" German ones, but to see that the fundamental conflict of interest is between the exploiters and oppressors (them) and the exploited and oppressed (us). Those who do not understand that the state's attacks on the PKK are also attacks on the entire left and workers' movement (German, Turkish and Kurdish) understand nothing!

Without the same legal rights as German leftists, Kurdish militants face the threat of deportation back to the Turkish state's torture chambers. This threat by the German government is not an empty one. In 1994, the SPD's minister of the interior for Baden-Württemberg brushed aside hypocritical concerns about "legality" and responded to similar Kurdish protests by saying that he had already started deportations. This is why we demand: Full citizenship rights for all immigrants—now! Stop the deportations!

Revolutionary Politics or Imperialist Diplomacy?

The International Bolshevik Tendency and its German section, the Gruppe Spartakus, stand for the defense of the Kurdish resistance, and particularly the PKK, against both

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Kurdish, Turkish immigrant workers: an integral part of German working class

the Turkish state and its imperialist allies. We have repeatedly called for lifting the ban on the PKK. In the face of the outrageous proceedings against Öcalan by Turkey's terrorist regime, it is necessary to organize broad united-front actions and mass mobilizations under the slogan: "Immediate and Unconditional Release of Abdullah Öcalan!" Instead, Nizametin Tas of the PKK central committee has appealed to the "progressive public" and "all democratic progressive groups" to send "observer delegations to Turkey" (MED TV News, 16 February). Such impotent moralistic appeals will not subdue the bloodhounds of the military dictatorship or their imperialist backers, nor will they be of any use in "safeguarding the life of chairman Apo"—this requires determined international mass mobilizations of immigrants and workers.

This is not the first time the PKK has relied on imperialist diplomacy rather than revolutionary mass mobilizations. Tas appeals to the governments of the European Union (EU) and the U.S. to "put pressure on the fascist Turkish state," while Kurdish demonstrators demand that the German government advocate a "fair" trial. We refuse to endorse demands that the Turkish military give Öcalan a "fair trial," or calls on Germany and the other European imperialists to apply diplomatic pressure on Turkey.

Turkey is not fascist, but its political regime is dominated by the military. When foxes put a hare on trial, the hare always ends up as their dinner, however formally correct the juridical procedure. Öcalan doubtless fulfils all the criteria for being convicted of high treason according to Turkey's Kemalist [Kemal Ataturk founded the modern Turkish state after World War I] legal code and judiciary—even a "fair" trial would put his life in jeopardy. Turkey's bloody rulers have no right to conduct any kind of trial of Öcalan. The Kemalist state has discriminated against and oppressed the Kurds since it was founded. Kurds are not allowed to speak their own language, their culture is suppressed, and their region is mired in deep poverty and economic backwardness. The Turkish state has responded to all signs of Kurdish resistance with censorship, arrest, torture, massacres and the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages. The PKK and Öcalan are not politically responsible for the thousands of people killed in the Turkish military's dirty war against the Kurdish nation. That responsibility lies solely with Turkey's rulers and their imperialist protectors. The only way that justice can prevail, and the only way to stop these barbaric attacks, is through the revolutionary overthrow of the oppressors.

The PKK's appeals to the imperialists are utopian and counterposed to the path of liberation for the Kurdish masses. Imperialism, as the oppressor of millions, cannot suddenly change its nature and become the liberator of the Kurds. The economic and political underdevelopment of Kurdistan and the Middle East is a product of the imperialist world system. The capitalists in the economically advanced imperialist countries use a combination of competition in the global market, access to investment and credits, and military muscle to ensure the continuation of their exploitation of the underdeveloped countries.

Under the terms of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which carved up the Middle East under British and French hegemony, the Kurds were divided between four states. Liberal appeals to the European Union, combined with the notion of offering Turkey EU membership, provided it agrees to respect "human rights," are utterly utopian. It is inconceivable that the EU will want to assume responsibility for running the Turkish "poorhouse," at least in the near future. All of the EU's supposed human-rights concerns simply serve as an excuse to hold Turkey at arm's length. They will not, and are not intended to, improve the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. If dependent Turkey were to join the EU, it would mean giving up its sovereignty (e.g., in agriculture) to further the interests of the European imperialists—

which could only inflict even more harm on the oppressed and exploited.

The U.S. imperialists' "protection" of the Kurds in northern Iraq keeps them penned in refugee camps and retards any struggle for liberation. It provides a smokescreen for American attacks on Iraq, and allows the Turkish military to freely attack PKK positions in northern Iraq. We call for driving the imperialists out of the Middle East, and the immediate withdrawal of the Turkish army from Kurdistan. We support the right of all oppressed nations to self-determination.

Contrary to the fantasies of some in the Kurdistan solidarity milieu, Öcalan's departure from Syria did not represent a diplomatic breakthrough in the search for a "political solution" to the war in Kurdistan. Öcalan's odyssey revealed how illusory the PKK's diplomatic hopes were. No state on earth was willing to grant Öcalan asylum or stand with the Kurdish liberation struggle. Italy politely asked Öcalan to leave and in Greece pro-Kurdish cabinet ministers found themselves in trouble. Öcalan is a veritable "hot potato." No government would have him, except his Turkish jailers. He shares the fate of the Kurdish nation as a pawn on the chessboard of international diplomacy.

Instead of appealing to the left and the international workers' movement, the PKK looked for support from the imperialists and Heinrich Lummer, an ultra-rightist German politician with fascist connections who is notorious for sending riot police to attack squatters in Berlin during the 1980s. The PKK's orientation to the right was not a political miscalculation—its roots lie in the PKK's petty-bourgeois, nationalist politics.

Socialism or Barbarism—Permanent Revolution or Stagism?

Like most Turkish Stalinists and Maoists, the PKK believes that the backwardness of Kurdistan means that socialism is not on the agenda and instead it is necessary to fight for a bourgeois-nationalist, multi-class "people's revolution," to open the road for independent (state-assisted) capitalist development. Leaving aside a bit of decorative, but meaningless, socialist phraseology, this is what the PKK's program boils down to. Inevitably this strategy requires the subordination of the interests of Kurdish workers and peasants to those of the feeble petty exploiters who make up the Kurdish bourgeoisie—grandiloquently dubbed the "patriotic bourgeoisie." The PKK turns a blind eye to the countless economic, political and personal links that tie the indigenous bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries to the landed elites and their imperialist patrons.

This is why the PKK attempted to establish a diplomatic rapprochement with the imperialists, and why they have long taken pride in collaborating with the "patriotic" Kurdish landowners. No ruling class ever allies itself with the toiling masses unless they are assured that the oppressed have subordinated their struggles to those of the bourgeoisie—in this case, it means accepting feudalist oppression in the name of uniting the Kurdish nation. This policy does not lead to liberation or an improved life for the exploited masses of Kurdistan. It has produced instead the anti-Semitic articles written by Öcalan (under his pen names Ayden Safer and A. Inanc, e.g., in *Ozgur Ulke*, 28/29 August 1994), as well as flirtation with Islamicist tendencies, and even explicit support for imperialist racism:

> "Unfortunately, the backwardness of our people is a blot on developed Germany. This makes me sad. Germany should not have been made to suffer this evil....This is why racism is spreading again. Quite justified, by the way! I also think that the right is right. I want to say quite openly that on this issue I do not think like a social democrat. The right-wingers are right."
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> —Öcalan in an interview with journalist Günther Wallraff

DER SPIEGEL

Turkish troops bombard Kurdish rebels

The PKK sees the task of Kurdish liberation as an essentially isolated national task (with the Kurdistan solidarity milieu as its semi-diplomatic support group), but communists view the Kurds' struggle as a potential catalyst for proletarian revolution throughout the Middle East. There is no isolated national path to economic development and social progress under capitalism in the era of imperialism with its global market and international division of labor. Recognizing this reality is the necessary starting point for all revolutionary calculations and actions. The dreams of the leaders of Asia's "tiger economies" about catching up with the imperialists have been buried beneath the wreckage of the latest financial crisis. Considering the economic backwardness of these countries and the pressures exerted by global competition, capital demands that for these economies to "develop," i.e., remain profitable, they must have vastly greater rates of exploitation of their human and natural resources. Fantasies about a "national democratic stage" of harmonious capitalist development prior to proletarian revolution can only serve the interests of the nascent national bourgeoisie and lead inexorably to a nightmare for the working class (China 1927, Spain 1936-39, Indonesia 1965-66, Chile 1972-73). The capitalists know this. However, petty-bourgeois formations like the PKK are still promoting the same bourgeois program and the same stagist model of national capitalist development which has led to defeat so often in the past.

The strategy of permanent revolution, vindicated in practice by the October Revolution of 1917, provides the only viable alternative. It is based on two premises: a) the tasks of the bourgeois revolution (democratic rights, the

land question and the national question) cannot be carried out by the national bourgeoisie, but only through proletarian revolution supported by the masses of impoverished peasants; and b) only international socialist revolution can open the road for the economic, political and cultural emancipation of the masses. The bureaucratic degeneration of the world's first workers' state through Stalin's policy of "socialism in one country" demonstrated this in practice.

Kurdistan & Revolution in the Middle East

We unconditionally defend the right of the Kurdish nation to self-determination, that is, to establish a separate state, but we do not currently advocate that the Kurds attempt to exercise this right:

> "In the present circumstances an independent Kurdish state would find itself in very great difficulty....surrounded by its historic oppressors, but it would be a society characterized by backward, pre-capitalist social structures. Because of its underdevelopment, an independent Kurdistan would find itself at the mercy of the regional as well as imperialist powers."
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> —*Bolschewik* No. 2

The essential obstacle to real social liberation is Kurdistan's lack of the primary prerequisite for socialist revolution: a proletariat.

> "Kurdistan is not a classical case of a colonial revolution, as for example, China and Vietnam were earlier this century. In both these cases, the proletariat was small, but with sufficient economic and political power to lead the peasantry in a successful assault on both the imperialist masters and their indigenous bourgeois allies."
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> —*Ibid.*

In China and Vietnam the victory of Stalinist-led guerrilla movements, which opposed the independent political activity of the proletariat, inevitably produced despotic, bureaucratically deformed workers' states. As we noted in our previous article:

> "One of the peculiarities of the Kurdish national question is that it is intertwined with the social question in the states with Kurdish minorities and, through them, in all the states of the Near East. The fight for the freedom of the Kurds requires a common struggle with the Turkish, Persian and Arab working masses. Any serious threat to capitalist rule in Turkey, for example, must inevitably pose the question of the Kurds. The Kurdish struggle for national liberation, on the other hand, could easily spark a wave of upheavals that would shatter the brittle regimes of the region."
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> —*Ibid.*

The existing capitalist states must be replaced by a socialist federation of the Middle East, within which the Kurds can decide their own future. If the Kurdish freedom struggle were to take this direction, the effects would be felt far beyond the Middle East. It could also provide a powerful impulse for proletarian struggle in Germany and every other country in Europe that is presently home to some of the millions of immigrant workers from the Middle East.

Proletarian Internationalism vs. Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism

The PKK's fight for an independent Kurdistan, which is not connected to the class struggle and lacks any socialist content, has reached a dead end. Victory in the guerrilla struggle seems to have disappeared from the PKK's agenda. The PKK's nationalist orientation is absolutely incompatible with the realities of the international class struggle. Indiscriminate attacks on Turkish tourist centers, shops and cafes can only serve to undermine internationalist unity among the exploited and oppressed, as opposed to legitimate attacks on agents of the Turkish or German states or fascists. Revolutionary internationalists oppose attacks on newsstands, tea houses or fast-food outlets which are targeted simply on the basis that they are Turkish. We would defend these premises, and their civilian patrons, against the blind fury of the PKK nationalists. We take the same approach toward attacks which do not directly and exclusively target the Turkish state or big business, but aim instead at tourist centers—nationalist attempts to hurt the Turkish state "indirectly" by ruthlessly killing Turkish, Kurdish and West European workers are indefensible.

The tragedy is that the PKK's nationalist logic is exactly the opposite of the requirements for the liberation of the Kurds from national oppression and semi-feudal exploitation. International working-class unity is the only viable alternative to the reactionary collaboration between German imperialism and Turkey's rulers.

A good example of how such an approach can work was the longshore boycott in the mid-1980s in San Francisco, where supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency played a leading role. This political strike against apartheid, which lasted for eleven days, was directed against unloading South African cargo. It cost the apartheid regime dearly, while promoting an internationalist and class-struggle approach to the burning political issues faced by the working class—essential prerequisites for the revolutionary liberation of humanity. Such an internationalist revolutionary perspective is realizable. In 1991, during the Gulf War, when the Turkish government sought to mobilize popular opinion against Iraq, spontaneous protests erupted in Turkish Kurdistan. The demands raised there were taken up by other Turkish and Kurdish workers in mass strikes and demonstrations. This political awakening of the Turkish working class in solidarity with the Kurdish liberation struggle was seen as a serious threat to the Turkish regime.

In Germany and other European states, revolutionary workers must openly and actively solidarize with the cause of immigrant workers and, in particular, with the struggle of the Kurds against national oppression. Revolutionaries must also seek to make connections with the proletarianized immigrants of the Middle East with the perspective of building a revolutionary alternative leadership within the unions counterposed to the existing reformist bureaucracy. The PKK, by organizing immigrant Kurds as Kurdish patriots rather than as workers without a fatherland, acts as an obstacle to proletarian internationalism and thus, ultimately, to the liberation of the Kurds. A careful analysis of the Kurdish question leads to the conclusion that, as important as it is to defend the PKK, it is equally important to sharply criticize their politics. Kurdish fighters must break with the PKK, as well as the numerous smaller Maoist and Stalinist pseudo-Leninist revisionist groupings, and participate in building a Leninist-Trotskyist international organization, based on the program of permanent revolution, with sections in every state—including Turkey and Germany. This is the road to the revolutionary liberation of the Kurds and all the other oppressed and exploited peoples of the world. ■