Transcript (part 2)

**Jo:** [00:00:00] Okay, we live in this place. What is the history of this place? How is it like this? What are the problems people are facing in this place? Why are they facing those problems? What are they doing about those problems? What have they done before about those problems? What happened to them when they did that thing?

**Anna:** Welcome back to part 2 of this Seeds for Change podcast, in conversation with Jo Taylor and Amy McGourty. Jo organises with the Solidarity Economy Association and the Kurdistan Solidarity Network. Amy is a trade unionist and de-colonial Irish language organiser. Both are based in Brighton. In part 1, we talked about what we mean by political education, the forms it can take, and the role it has played in movements around the world. We heard from Amy about the example of the hedge schools in 18th century Ireland, and their role in the anti-colonial struggle. We discussed the relationship of language to collective self being and the role of language erasure in processes of colonisation, including in both Ireland and Kurdistan. We discussed examples and challenges of political education in Britain, why it seems hard to prioritise in our movements, the need to bring theory and practice together, and what we can learn from anti-colonial struggles about our own place in the world system. In this episode, we talk more about the Kurdish freedom struggle, the huge role of political education in revolutionary movements, and what this means for our context. Thanks for listening.

**Becks:** Hello and welcome back. Um, Jo, last episode you talked a lot about examples from the Kurdish context, and it'd be great to hear more about how political education works in Rojava and the role that it plays in struggle. Could you give us an overview?

**Jo:** Yeah. I think that it's a, a really, really core role in kind of every aspect of life in a lot of ways. Um, so we're talking about quite a lot of different territories, right? Um, we're talking about the four parts of Kurdistan. So North Kurdistan inside the borders of Turkey, so kind of southeast Turkey; West Kurdistan, which is also northeast Syria; South Kurdistan, which is also northern Iraq; and East Kurdistan, which is also the west of Iran.

So the two regions that I know the most about are North Kurdistan inside Turkey, and West Kurdistan. Or actually now, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which is by no means only Kurdish. In fact, Kurdish people are not even in the majority, I think, anymore in the population. Which is under this kind of stateless self government system based on, um, communes, which are like neighborhood assembly structures, a system of like, committees, councils, unions, cooperatives... kind of organisation of life at every level. Um, in this kind of huge ecosystem, tapestry of structures, which are all interconnected, and to some degree autonomous, but not independent at all from each other. Governed by kind of the, the values, morals, ethics, and principles of that movement. Which is very much about building up a moral and political society, which is capable of ruling itself without a state.

So of course for this, you need a humongous amount of political education. And that is from, um, in neighborhood assemblies, kind of village to village or street to street. Um, women's education in particular, like all the different bodies of the women's movement are carrying out some form of education, whether that is on healthcare and like reproductive care and things like this, like, on a street by street level. Um, running primary schools, especially in like mother language. So not only Kurdish, but also other languages which were formally kind of outlawed by the regime. Um, so like the Syriac language is another of the three official languages of the region. So now it's Arabic, Kurdish and Syriac are the three official languages now.

Um, there are also academies, which are nothing like the kind of capitalist academies that are sort of sprouting up around this island now, but are kind of run by often the women's movement. So this is education, political education for sure, like based on discussing, very similar in some ways to kind of consciousness raising groups that we talked about before, but also with input, like the history of women, of the state system, of the colonisation of Kurdistan, of the world system, you know, all of these different things. And again, lots of the women going to these will be illiterate, so it's not like what I think a lot of the time people seem to picture in their heads when they hear the words political [00:05:00] education.

Um, an analogy that I hear people talk about a lot that have spent a very long time in the Kurdish movement or, or from this region, is that the education is like water. And at points you feel yourself kind of shriveling up like a, like a tree that has, you know, in a, in a kind of desertifying region. And when you get the education, you feel like, full of life again, because it's this kind of feeling nurtured and nourished and, and again, yeah, understanding more who you are and who we are and what we therefore need to do. You know, how is it like this?

So this is talking really about Rojava. North and East Syria. Um, of course there's lots of different structures going on in different parts of Kurdistan. There's also like the political parties. There's um, assemblies of different forms. There's like houses also of justice, also in Rojava, like the women's houses they're dealing with, like, any issues around like domestic abuse or in relationships, marriages, rapes and things like this. And then also, like, they've solved hundreds of like intergenerational blood feuds in tribes and things like this.

So there's lots of different forms of work going on, and I'm sure the, the types of education work are looking very different according to this. But we should remember as well that the, the Kurdish Freedom Movement, which has initiated the Rojava Revolution in North and East Syria, and also has been active for more than 50 years now in North Kurdistan, inside Turkey, comes from a period of like quite intensive political education by the first kind of 10 people to commit themselves totally to that movement. Who spent years, you know, reading and discussing together. To build up a very, very solid foundation. Which is now a movement with millions of people in it, like across the whole of the world, um, including in the diaspora in all the different countries.

So seeing it as a basis for becoming big, you know, it's not like, shall we do action or shall we do education? It's just a really false dichotomy, like the, the things reinforce each other. And I've heard it said that the kind of guerilla, like the, you know, the fighters in the mountains of Kurdistan who are the most, you know, dedicated, we can say, to the struggle in some ways, although everyone also working in society is, can be seen as equally as dedicated... The guerilla spend like 50% of their time in education. So it's totally kind of, yeah, the bird with the two wings again.

**Amy:** That's fascinating because often hedge school masters would join oath bound societies, like the Rightboys or the Whiteboys who were engaged in sort of guerilla warfare. And so like various scholars who've written about the history of the hedge school movement have described it as education and guerilla warfare combined. Um, yeah, I think that's fascinating. I'm so glad to learn about all of these linkages between these freedom struggles.

**Jo:** I was gonna say a thing about, uh, Franz Fanon as well, who, you know, he's one of the many thinkers whose thoughts have been kind of synthesized into the, what we call the paradigm in the Kurdish freedom movement. Um, the sort of way of seeing the world. Also the, the, the paradigm is like the way the world is organised that we're trying to kind of get to. So they would say like, we currently live in capitalist modernity where we want to get to is democratic modernity. So this is a paradigm of like yeah, a moral and political society that can organise itself without a state, based on the principles of women's liberation, ecology and like real democracy.

So Franz Fanon, of course has been a very inspirational, like foundational thinker for a lot of national liberation struggles all around the world. And he had this thing about the first bullet. The first bullet that you fire is against the system inside yourself. Against like the coloniser, the assimilated person, the ways in which you are brought into alignment through coercion and force with the oppressor. Who you're also against. And for me, political education is like part of that first bullet.

But right at the beginning you said, uh, in your introduction, there can be people listening to this who say, okay, just in the, in the actions of community organising or a campaign or you know, activism in inverted commas, there is no need for political education as like a structured thing because all of the understanding of what we're doing comes through practice essentially.

Um, so I'd written down some thoughts about that. Which are that without doing the, the work of political education in the way that we're talking about it, there is a disconnect from like the wider context that that work is going on within. The other movements, [00:10:00] the other... um, all of the systems at play, you know, systems of oppression. Class, race, gender, et cetera. Um, how they are historically in force and manifesting in the time and place that we're in. How the conditions are such that they are, that we need to do this campaign or this activism or this whatever. Um, you are missing then a collective understanding. The chance to build up and develop a collective understanding of, like, who we are, where we are, what we're doing, and why, which can lead quite a lot of the time to groups falling apart. Um, this burnout stuff that we often talk about. Um, or people thinking that we're doing different things, or that we're doing things for different reasons, can often lead to different ideas about what should be done, which can lead to kind of conflict and falling out.

Um, also like looking very narrowly at one block or one village or one country and not seeing the bigger picture. Like the world system is all interconnected, like, all of us all over the world are struggling against the same system, although it shows up very differently. Like here on this island, we receive a lot of bribes to participate in these systems of oppression. Um, in other places there's a much more brutal existence. However, the, the ways which we're being oppressed, if we're, you know, struggling for, accommodation, time, money to heat our homes, you know, healthcare, like all this kind of stuff, this is also coming from the world capitalist system. Just as wars, genocide in Gaza, the colonisation of Kurdistan, like, mass imprisonments, all of this stuff. So without understanding that and looking at all of the bigger picture, then we can kind of get lost in the weeds.

**Anna:** Mm. I was just thinking about what you said about the shriveled up tree. Like where are we having those conversations? And I feel like the lack of time and space to do that, like to talk about things and understand where we are and like share analysis with each other. It just like leads to a feeling that we're like living in unprecedented times and we've got no control of anything and we don't understand anything. And like, the grasp that people maybe ha had, when you read like 20th century literature, Marxist or political theory or whatever, and you're like, oh yeah, this is like, they were like grasping something. They were like understanding something. And then like, I just often feel like we are just in a thing that we just always catching up to, like we don't really understand what we're in.

In the context of Britain, just thinking about the fact that Reform are polling the top party in the polls at the moment, there were these massive mobilizations last summer of the far right. Like, clearly there, clearly the right is like, also doing its education. Or doing some, creating some sort of political analysis among people that's popular and successful. And like, where the hell do we start? Like what does it look like to try and really take this seriously as a big part of our political organising in this context?

**Amy:** I think it's absolutely the case that, yeah, when when the left fails to provide an analysis and a path forward for something, when there's a vacuum there, the right absolutely will fill it. And we've seen that in so many different, like particularly struggles against fascism throughout history. Like I'm reminded of the battle of Cable Street in particular and the role of kind of political education, but also kind of the left providing solutions on those kind of really bread and butter issues, housing, food insecurity, in that particular context. And I think, I think we need to be looking to the past and trying to take lessons from the past and apply them to today.

I think ultimately it involves committing to political education, committing to showing up, to discuss, to being, I think it definitely has to involve being present physically by putting your body into a struggle. I think there's absolutely, and I know there are various reasons why people can be constrained or prevented from showing up in person or from putting their body into a struggle, but there are far too many people for whom those barriers are not in place, who simply are not putting their body into a struggle and committing to showing up and to learning together.

**Jo:** If we look at the trajectory of the Kurdish movement as an example, we are right now in about 1971. So we don't have any organisation really. I mean, for the kind of... There are, of course, there are groups, there are campaigns, there are kind of movements and things like that. But in the sense that we're talking about, like, how to build a truly revolutionary long term movement, which is capable of very big change, like we are talking about huge changes that are needed, um, we [00:15:00] just simply don't have that form of, you know, organisation.

So I think what you're saying about commitment is very important. For me, commitment to relationships. These are my comrades. We commit to each other, to overcoming all of our, you know, all of the things that we learn from the system that we socialise into ourselves, including our aversion to commitment and like all of these different things. We work together on overcoming those things. And we don't, you know, kind of flip flop in and out. We can change the structures, we can change the groups. We can change the map of the path that we're on when we see that we need to because of our analysis. Our analysis has gone deeper and we understand that we're not doing things in the right way.

Um, these things are not important, but the relationships with the comrades, this is very important. And if we don't have these kind of base units, then I, I think the kind of rushing into trying to organise, which I sort of see lots of people doing in wider society kind of individually, trying to build projects and, and kind of things like that. When you're kind of the only one that's kind of fully committed to it, or you're sort of seeing it in this long term revolutionary way, but the people that you're organising with kind of aren't. Um, you know, you haven't done the work of building that alignment or seeing if they're actually the right people for you to be organising with.

Like, if you're at that point when you're like, I am serious. I am committing to this path. You need other people, at least one or two, who are serious and committed to that path. And then together you're gonna build up your understanding together. You're gonna work out what is the form, what is the timing? How do we make the road that we're on together? Um, but don't rush into trying to be massive until you've got your little base.

**Amy:** What does that look like in practice? Like is that... Does that start with like knowing your neighbours ultimately?

**Jo:** I think it starts with knowing your comrades. And being, being real about where you are. There's a text that, um, one of my groups have been reading called Organisation Means Commitment by Grace Lee Blog, Grace Lee Boggs, who was organising with the Black Panthers, with the black liberation struggle. And it's a text that was written 55 years ago and a lot of people are saying both kind of, wow, I wish I read this 10 years ago. And also, isn't it so depressing, like how relevant these things are still today, 55 years later? Um, but one of the things that she's talking about is, is this really. Like if you have two or three people who are trying to organise together, and one of them is kind of like, not committed really, they want to do things in a, a short term way, it's more like a hobby for them or something like that. It's really better to not organise with that person at this time. If that's the place you're at. You know, to go ahead from the very first step, we're talking about the very first step. Yeah later when you, when you are building things, of course you want to be able to include like all of the people in society, to be able to like build a massive movement, but we're, we're not at that stage, we're talking about right at the beginning. So I think that is a useful text to read as well.

**Becks:** I was thinking about commitment when you were talking about the group that's starting with reading James Connolly and you were saying, you know, like, let's not rush into strategies, plans, dah, dah, dah. And I was thinking like, there's always a bit in me that's kind of resistant to like, let's not rush, because it feels like it kind of goes along with like, let's not really do anything.

And I was thinking like, in a context of commitment, you can not rush. But in a context where you're kind of, you've washed up together and you've just got these few moments where you can keep the energy around the thing to keep doing it, then that generates that kind of urgency of like, we have to jump into making this something real to kind of, to keep the people. Yeah.

**Jo:** Yeah, it's like you're building something really, really tall, but it's built on really wobbly foundations and it is just gonna fall down. Do you know what I mean? So yeah, we can rush and build a lot of things, but they are gonna fall down. Like it is just slow work. You know, building revolutionary movements is slow work. And you have to, to get really firm paces so that you're in a much better position when shit starts to really crumble.

**Becks:** And going back to what you said, you said at one point, um, there were 10 committed people that became a movement. And another point you said right now in Britain we're at about 1971 in the Kurdish movement. Um, what would be a kind of loose outline of, like, that process and the stages that happened?

**Jo:** Um, in the history of the Kurdish movement?

**Becks:** Yeah! [Laughter].

**Jo:** Um, so I guess we're talking about post the 1968 [00:20:00] movement. Which for people listening, if they don't know, it's like a moment in which, all over the world, there were like huge massive movements which emerged. Like revolutionary movements, especially national liberation movements, Marxist Leninist movements, um, student movements, anti-war movements, feminist movements. Uh, very, very strong. Like huge, all over the world.

Um, so of course this also was a very huge moment in like Turkey, where a lot of the people who became the Kurdistan revolutionaries, like the first iteration of kind of the current Kurdish Freedom movement, were organising as students in the Turkish capital, Ankara. And then there was a coup. So there was a series of coups every 10 years in Turkey. The coup of 1971 really squashed all of the organising. Lots of people went to prison. Um, and then it was forbidden to kind of, as I understand it, even gather in groups, let alone kind of organise together. So everything went very, very underground. And also most people who'd been very committed to the movements before were in prison.

And then when people started to come out of prison, like very small groups of people gathered. So Abdullah Öcalan, who's the like ideological leader of the Kurdish Freedom Movement still today, despite having been in prison for 25 years in largely solitary confinement, um, he gets out of prison and he goes to the house of two, actually Turkish, they're not actually Kurdish people, leftists that he knew. And he says, um, I'm gonna come and live here with you and we are gonna organise together. And they're like, okay.

So then these three kind of begin discussing, reading, analysing. More people join them. There's like 10 people, they're all living in one house. They're rotating who goes to work for money. They're in these, like... They read revolutionary texts from all over the world. Um, analyse all of the different movements and struggles that are occurring, analyse their own history. Then they make a decision to go back to Kurdistan and understand their own land and their own people better.

By this point there's like, I dunno, thousands of them. Um, later they begin, like, the prison struggle, the armed struggle. And then much later, of course, like all of the village communes, councils, the, the women's movement gets really big in the nineties. So there's like many different phases. And there's a lot of phases as well, especially in the kind of going back to the homeland, back to Kurdistan. Of going to the villages. So sending people, um, to every place. All of the, the cadre of the movement are like going all over the place, house to house to house. Sitting on the floor with the women, discussing their problems. Talking to everyone, sitting, drinking tea together, and really understanding the people and what are their needs and how to win them over, you know?

And I think this is why it became such a massive movement. ' Cause it... I think this is the case in all movements, you know, when you look at the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, like the Zapatistas, like any big revolutionary movement, being part of society is really key. You have to know your people. You have to be your people, be part of your people. You're not separate from them. Lots of the movements that I've been part of here, I think this is a criticism that we've, we've received as well. Like we've heard from, um, probably not only from the Kurdish movement, probably from lots of movements. You know, seeing ourselves as a bit separate from the rest of society, kind of a bit niche somehow. Um, this is really damaging. It's something that we need to overcome.

**Becks:** That also reminds me of something that you said earlier, and I think you both used the phrase, like, 'know yourself', somewhere along the line and you said something like, you know, not in a, not in an individualistic therapy sense. And I guess I'm aware that like we live in such an individualist culture that it's very hard to hear, to hear those words in any other way. And I'd be interested to hear you kind of flesh out, like, what ' know yourself' means in a collectivised way, a political way, a historical way.

**Jo:** I mean, nobody is an individual, right? Like, every word I'm saying, I'm saying it because other people said the, the words to me. Like we learn language, we learn culture. We live and survive from birth because of other people. Other people, the communities around me, the society around me, family, friends, everyone. Everyone I've ever spoken to has in some sense shaped me. So there really is no such thing as an individual.

**Anna:** I suppose like, thinking about your question, Becks, the idea that like who we are is collective, is like understood by the right as well, isn't it? Like, [00:25:00] whiteness, the nation, the idea that like, we belong here or that Britishness is like a, a thing that we belong to. And like, that that excludes other people, is like one way of people imagining themselves. But I guess there are many other like historical ways that people like on this island have thought about themselves. And that's, there's been very deliberate attempts by like, the state and capital to like eliminate those ways or like change how people think about themselves. So I feel like it also takes like a proactive thing to like, cultivate a different type of collective understanding of ourselves. That is like, I guess what Friere would call more like reality or that isn't a false reality.

**Jo:** I mean I think we're all people of... like, we're all connected to time and place. The Zapatistas talk about calendars and geographies. And that's also containing within it the understanding that there's lots of different ways of mapping calendars and geographies, like time and place. I think it would, if you do political education of any kind, like if you do analysis and research and looking into who we are, you are gonna very quickly come up with, we're all migrants and children of migrants and people have always moved around this island. So the idea that we're somehow like this nation of white people that are all from the same place is I think very easily dismantled like very quickly.

Um. But *how* is it that we're all children of migrants and you know, how have all these different people come to live together? How have we shaped each other? You know, how is it that two generations ago, my family, part of my family was speaking Irish, for example? And, you know, there are people who died in, in the struggle for the liberation of Ireland in only two generations before me. And yet I've grown up as an English person. Without any connection to the language. And kind of, I'm in my, you know, midlife before I'm even discovering most of those histories.

So there's lots of different ways in which we've been cut from our different journeys and experiences. Kind of intergenerationally. And understanding that, and understanding the social fabric that is here as a result of all of these many different stories. Which are all collective stories though. Do you know what I mean? And each, each of those stories, they overlap with each other. They have different colours and characteristics, but it's, I think there's a difference from thinking about who am I personally, in a way which is then very focused on me needing to work through all of my particular traumas and hangups and things like that, which then can very easily become quite a big barrier for me to be involved in political organising.

**Anna:** Mm.

**Jo:** Do you know what I mean? Um, or if we see it as a collective thing, then it's very much like, how do we move forward with this? And it becomes a shared path that you are on. And I think that organising together is the only logical conclusion of that. So it's a kind of turning in or turning out. And an empowering or a kind of shrinking in a lot of ways comes from these different ways of looking at collective or individual self. Which, you know, it's very beneficial, I think, for the, the system that we're in and the, the people with the most power, if we do just focus very much on our own stories and our own lives and our own insecurities and traumas.

**Becks:** Going back to the question that you asked about, like the rise of fascism...

**Anna:** Yeah, I guess I was thinking about what you were both saying before about commitment and I guess like what you were saying Jo, about like, in terms of organisation we're in 1971, if, if it was Kurdistan. And that this is like a very slow process and we don't wanna rush and we want to be ready. But then like, I'm also thinking about, how do we react to things or like how do we keep alive something? Like, I dunno, I was just thinking about in Lancaster, we've recently been fighting to like save some council housing that's being sold off. And that the process of doing that involves organising with people who are like, probably very far away from the page we're on in terms of their politics.

And I was thinking about it like, the world is different for that person if like, they know their council house is getting sold off and no one gives a shit, to like the world they're living in if their council house is getting sold off and like, some people come and knock on their door and say like, we are really angry [00:30:00] about this and we wanna help you. And maybe like, they're not ready or I'm not ready or... But like, we still want to keep something alive. We still want people to experience solidarity, to experience taking action, to exist in a world where those things are like still in memory, or like... So even though we're like, going into many situations like ill-equipped or not in alignment with people or we maybe don't have the understanding that we wanna have together, like, we still are in these situations all the time that we want to like, act in. How do we like, keep both these things alive? Like trying to find the time to like understand ourselves, understand our context, have this like, long, long game strategy, but also like act in the present and react to things that are happening.

**Jo:** I think it comes down to, first of all, who are we? So you just said, they don't have the time and I don't have the time in, in which case, you know, your example there is like a single issue campaign. So you're talking about saving some buildings, saving some homes, maybe. This is really important. It's really good for its own sake, right. And if the people involved, that's what they wanna do, that's the extent of what they wanna do, then that's great. If there are people who want to be part of a long-term, deep, systemic shift, we cannot, those people cannot be reacting to everything that happens. It's impossible.

Like we see every time something big happens, there is a huge reaction in the left, like a big new organisation is formed, a coalition, perhaps, a new campaign perhaps. Um, and then that attracts very committed people, committed in the sense that really wanting to see change, really putting all their heart and soul and energy into that thing. In a way which is very, um, unaware perhaps of the dangers of, of burning out without any kind of long-term strategy, without building trust and building relationships, and putting in the time to understand how such things have happened before, how they've been resisted, and how also those kinds of reactive, quickly coming together, have often fizzled out very quickly. You end up with a lot of very burnout people who could have been amazing revolutionaries. You know, and, and perhaps still will be, but they'll have to take a bit of time out, right?

So if we keep reacting in this kind of way, are we going to build anything long term? Will we be capable of changing anything? Not really. Like we, we will have some wins. We might save some council estates from being privatised. We might save some land from being exploited. But it's gonna be very short, very small. And possibly those things are still gonna be taken off us, you know, in 10 years when there's less energy on the ground because our attention's all diverted to something else.

So if we are people, or we know people who are truly committed, ready, you know, to embark on the long journey of building revolutionary struggle, we need to find each other, gather together, with however few people that is, and being very real, uh, realistic about that. Putting in the work of developing those relationships. Of course, like participating, but in a more coordinated way, in a careful way, with the work going on in, in the neighborhoods close to us, in the movements close to us. You know, it's not like depriving, you know, our energy from these things, but being very purposeful and very careful about that. Building the relationships that are needed. But not throwing everything against wall after wall after wall.

**Anna:** Mmm.

**Becks:** And what does it look like? The other thing, the committed thing, the long-term thing, the building the revolutionary struggle thing?

**Jo:** Yeah, I mean, I think we need to build the seeds, really. The little saplings, you know. Or like the bricks that will then be part of coming together to make the bigger building. So it's the smallest level really. The little collective, the commune. The affinity group. Affinity group, I don't like so much 'cause I think it's more related to like, direct action perhaps. Which, I mean you might want to also do this, but if you only do this then...

**Becks:** And in very concrete terms, is it like anything that is consciously chosen as strategy rather than reactively chosen in the moment?

**Jo:** Yeah, consciously chosen and based on thorough analysis together. Right? So I imagine you'll be reading things, you'll be discussing what you're reading. You'll [00:35:00] be mapping the world around you. You'll be understanding, okay, we live in this place. What is the history of this place? How is it like this? What are the problems people are facing in this place? Why are they facing those problems? What are they doing about those problems? What have they done before about those problems? What happened to them when they did that thing? What are they doing now? What is happening here that we don't even see because of who we are and our own histories that brought us to this place? And then I think it becomes slowly clearer what needs to be done. But it, it's gonna look different for every group of people in every time and place.

**Anna:** Thanks for listening to this podcast. We're Seeds for Change. We run training and make resources for grassroots groups that are campaigning for social and environmental justice. Thanks for listening.