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Describe a protest you have seen or taken part in and the positive ways it has changed your perspective, your life or your community.

In September of 2022, a series of protests erupted across Iran in response to the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, in police custody who was arrested for wearing “improper Hijab.” As a member of the Iranian diaspora in Canada, I participated in a local demonstration to show my support for the efforts of the people in Iran who were calling for a revolution to end the oppressive theocracy that was killing peaceful protestors mercilessly.

Our demonstration wasn’t quite successful. A fraction of the Iranian community in our city showed up. We didn’t quite know why we were gathering and what our goal was. We felt helpless and ineffective. As a graduate student, I had already been quite involved with union work and advocacy on campus and so was fully aware of the importance and difficulties of organizing but the challenges of such political activism were quite different from the labour activism I had experienced before. Whereas academic labour and student unions in Canada are already established institutions with existing foundations upon which incremental progress can be implemented, we needed to build a civic institution from scratch.

Over the next months, I witnessed how a local grassroots organizing committee – comprised of student activists and older community members – emerged to guide the previously aimless efforts of the already motivated people as well as to reach out to new members to join the movement. Weekly demonstrations were organized with the aim of informing the local citizens of the events in Iran, petitions were devised to be presented to the Parliament, funds were raised to be delivered to the affected families in Iran, and knowledge mobilization meetings were held for the organizers and interested parties. I had a small part in these efforts by leading the organization of a conference on the history of the Women’s Movement in Iran that was held at our university.

The revolution in Iran has not yet come to fruition. That is because the labour unions and other civic societies were systematically dismantled in Iran and the diaspora in other places – just like my town – has not had organizing experience before. However, I have come to understand the importance of such institutions in situations where there are a lot of motivated people whose efforts need to be focused. A slogan of the revolution was said by Hamed Esmaeilion, a Toronto-based dentist whose wife and daughter were killed on flight PS752 that was shot down by the Iranian regime which compelled him to co-establish a civic organization to seek justice for the victims. He often says: “Do not mourn, organize!” I knew how important unions and grassroots organizations were to the health of a democracy but this experience taught me how they are crucial for the creation of one and for fighting an autocracy.