



Renters And Housing Union

The Renters And Housing Union (VIC) is a member-run Union of renters and people in precarious housing, formed out of the rent strike as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. We collectively organise for the right to safe and secure housing through self-advocacy, education, and frontline eviction defence.

Campaign Brief: End the Housing Crisis - Extend the Eviction Ban

On March 29th, the temporary protections Victorian renters have enjoyed are set to end, yet the economic effects of the pandemic are continuing. As 2 million renters in Victoria, we are 30% of Victoria's population, and without extending these rental protections, we will face eviction and insurmountable debt.

The pandemic has highlighted the pre-existing housing crisis in Australia, and without your support, on March 29th the protections keeping thousands of Victorian renters with a roof over their head will end.

The extension of rental schemes and cancellation of existing debts is critical to the protection and security of housing for renters beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Our Demands

1. Cancel Debt

The Victorian Government must legislate a waiver for rental debt including arrears and deferred rental payments accrued from March 2020 - April 2021 for all Victorian renters.

2. End Evictions

Possession Orders and Evictions must be banned for renters in financial hardship including those served through Notice to Vacate on any grounds, including failure to comply with obligations such as rent.

3. Extend Rental Protections

Victorian Government must extend, until September 2021:

- The Residential Tenancies Dispute Settlement rent reduction scheme
- The ban on rental increases for all Victorian residential tenancies



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Background

'COVID-19 may end up being this generation's Great Depression. The determinants of health, and how they are distributed, should be our guiding measure of a successful Australia as we rebuild from COVID-19'¹ - [Friel & Demaio, 2020](#)

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact Australia in mid-March 2020, over 950,000 more people in Australia have faced unemployment², underemployment, and the challenges to getting back on their feet amid a global pandemic.

On March 29th, the temporary protections that have afforded Victorian renters some measure of security will end, yet the economic effects of the pandemic continue. As renters, we are 30% of Victoria's population. Many of us were considered essential workers as the pandemic raged. Without extending these rental protections, we face eviction and insurmountable debt.

The housing crisis will continue to deepen without urgent action. The only way to avoid a crisis of eviction and homelessness is to cancel rental debt, as the reports cited in this document recommend. The moratorium on evictions during COVID-19 showed that the government has the power to properly protect renters, and they must continue to do so.

With the stroke of a pen, the government can guarantee over 2 million Victorians are able to keep a roof over our heads. We call on the Andrews government to take substantial action to protect those most vulnerable to the pandemic's ongoing economic impacts.

¹ Friel & Demaio, 2020

<https://insightplus.mja.com.au/2020/14/covid-19-can-we-stop-it-being-this-generations-great-depression/>

² Unemployment down to 11.7% in January – lowest since March 2020, but under-employment increases again, Feb 2021

<http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8632-australian-unemployment-estimates-january-2021-202102050616>



How you can help

Endorse our Demands

Contact Eirene Tsolidis Noyce - Secretary, RAHU

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0414 893 484

Paddy - Media and Communications Officer, RAHU

paddy@rahu.org.au

Share your support on Social Media

#CancelDebt #EndEvictions #ExtendRentalProtections

- FB: <https://www.facebook.com/rentersandhousingunion>
- Twitter: @RAHUnion
- Instagram: @RAHUnionvic

Join us on March 28th

Sunday, March 28th, 12pm

State Parliament, Spring Street, East Melbourne

The 29th of March marks the end of the eviction moratorium in Victoria. Thousands of Victorian renters will be at threat of eviction. The housing crisis is a choice made by the government. Andrews will deliberately make thousands of renters homeless. If he could stop evictions before, he can do it again.

Stand with us for our demands:

- Cancel Debt
- End Evictions
- Extend Rental Protections

Email your MPs

Daniel Andrews, MP daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

James Merlino, Deputy Premier james.merlino@parliament.vic.gov.au

Richard Wynne, Minister for Housing richard.wynne@parliament.vic.gov.au

Melissa Horne, Minister for Consumer Affairs melissa.horne@parliament.vic.gov.au



Email template:

Dear Daniel Andrews MP, James Merlino MP, Richard Wynne MP, Melissa Horne MP

We are calling on you to support thousands of renters to ensure the Victorian Government keep people home, to keep us safe.

In March 2020, at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Victorian Government instituted a ban on evictions for the thousands of renters in hardship. Since then, the COVID-19 Omnibus Bill legislation has protected thousands of renters, allowing us to stay at home.

On March 29th, The COVID-19 Renters Omnibus Bill is set to end, alongside Jobseeker and Jobkeeper being slashed. Thousands of Victorian renters have thousands of dollars of rental debt they are unable to pay, and without extended protections, will face eviction.

Homelessness organisations are already overwhelmed and are now facing cuts to the tune of \$56 million from the Federal Government.

This means that the only things standing between thousands of Victorians and homelessness are the protections provided by the Victorian Government's extension of the COVID-19 Omnibus Bill and the rental protections it contains.

The Victorian COVID-19 Omnibus eviction moratorium showed that the government has the power to properly protect renters. At the stroke of a pen, the Victorian Government can make sure over 2 million Victorians keep a roof over our heads.

We are calling on you to protect those most vulnerable to the pandemic's ongoing economic impacts by calling for:

- **A ban on evictions**
Possession orders and evictions must be banned for renters in financial hardship, including those served through Notice to Vacate for any grounds including failure to comply with obligations such as rent.
- **Cancel rental debt**
Rental debt including arrears and deferred rental payments accrued from March 2020 - April 2021 for all Victorian renters must be waived.
- **Extend rental protections until at minimum September 2021**
 - Extend the COVID-19 Omnibus Bill for Renters including the ban on rental increases and Notices to Vacate
 - Extend the Residential Tenancies Dispute Settlement rent reduction scheme



Our Messages

To truly prevent exacerbating the homelessness crisis, the Victorian Government needs to extend rental protections.

'COVID normal' shouldn't mean housing precarity. To head off an eviction wave, and prevent further homelessness, debt must be cancelled.

We cannot and should not be expected to pay for this crisis, especially to those who seek to profit from the roof over our heads.

The Government needs to stop normalising landlords as a catchment system for the overflow of housing demand. We need serious and sustained investment in public housing, and we need it now.

The eviction moratorium has shown that the Victorian government can extend protections to renters. At the stroke of a pen, they can do it again.

Issues

The eviction wave

Compounding factors in this crisis, including rental debt, the end of the eviction moratorium and government support payments being cut, will mean renters across Victoria are potentially set to face evictions at higher rates than pre-COVID levels.

JobSeeker and JobKeeper entitlements will soon end. With unemployment at 6.4% and underemployment at 8.5%³, a cessation of the eviction moratorium will cause possession orders to exceed 2018-19 levels, as precarious renters face a greater likelihood of rental arrears and consequent eviction.

³<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release#states-and-territories>



Rental debt

Under the rent reduction scheme, real estate agents have coerced renters into rent deferrals and providing excessive or unreasonable amounts of personal information⁴.

Renters in hardship cannot afford to pay these debts. Legally, some renters may be judgment proof in Victoria, and may not be collected from⁵. That said, real estate agents and landlords have continued to pursue rental debts owed, and forced tenants through VCAT termination hearings regardless of their demonstrable hardship.

RAHU has defended our members in negotiation, waiving \$55,500 in rental debt since December 2020. This debt represents only 3.87% of our member cases.

- In the RAHU COVID-19 Rental Survey, 48 % of all respondents stated that they were in debt. This did not include HECS debt.
- More than 70,000 rent reduction agreements had been registered with Consumer Affairs Victoria, as at February 24, 2021⁶
- Of the 33 real estate agencies RAHU members dealt with from May to September, 2020, 23 (69%) of agencies attempted to [coerce tenants into accepting rent deferrals](#) during the pandemic.
- [Better Renting's recent report](#) estimates that up to 973,000 renters nationally have accrued debt from the pandemic.

Rental stress and self-eviction

Rental stress is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as “housing that costs 30% or more of gross household income.”

Renters can face pressure to move out or ‘self-evict’ due to socio-economic factors; mental stress and exhaustion due to rental stress, and coercion and harassment by landlords and real estate agents.

⁴ Renters and Housing Union (2020). COVID-19 Omnibus Legislation - Renters 3 Month Review. [online] p.10. Available at: <https://rahu.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/RAHU-Renters-3-Month-Review.pdf> [Accessed 16 Mar. 2021].

⁵ ‘Bleeding people dry - the need to cancel debt’ RAHU, March 2021

<https://rahu.org.au/bleeding-people-dry-the-need-to-cancel-debt/>

⁶ Wells, R. (2021). “Dire” outcome for thousands of renters as end of eviction moratorium looms. [online] Domain. Available at: <https://www.domain.com.au/news/dire-outcome-for-thousands-of-renters-as-end-of-eviction-moratorium-looms-1032008/> [Accessed 16 Mar. 2021].



To escape this pressure and harassment, renters often choose under these constrained pressures to 'voluntarily' leave their homes, even if they don't want to.

Renters are pressured to move out due to inability to pay rent, leaving the remaining tenant on the lease liable, with a greater difficulty of securing a proportionate reduction in rent.

- In an unreleased report by RAHU, we have found that 26% of renters surveyed have had to move out or 'self-evict' in 2020 due to rental stress from COVID-19
- The 2020 report 'Renting in the time of COVID' by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) found the following:
 - Almost 50% of households have experienced "stress or anxiety as a result of COVID-19".⁷
 - 30% said they had "struggled to make ends meet or skipped meals", and 40% indicated that after paying rent they could not afford essentials such as "bills, clothing, transport and food"⁸.

Rent increases

From March 29th 2021, rent increases will be allowed again. As a union, we stand against our right to housing being dictated by and dependent on market forces.

For us renters stuck in the private market, the residential act legislation defines 'excessive' as in relation to the rental market. Yet with the new amendments, landlords will still have allowance to set either a "fixed dollar amount" or "percentage increase", regardless of market index⁹.

This will force renters to make proactive claims disputing the rent increase, placing the onus (and therefore the stress) of making these claims on the renter, with higher risk of facing retaliation and potential eviction.

⁷ Baker, E., Bentley, R., Beer, A. and Daniel, L. (2020) Renting in the time of COVID-19: understanding the impacts, AHURI Final Report No. 340, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/340>, doi:10.18408/ahuri3125401.

⁸ *Ibid.* Executive Summary

⁹ "Option 2: a fixed percentage increase"; "Option 3: a fixed dollar amount"

<https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/renting/during-a-lease-or-residency/rent-and-other-payments/rent-increases>



Vacancy rates

- Melbourne's vacancy rate was up to 3.8% in August 2020, from 1.6% in August 2019¹⁰
- Inner city vacancy rates up to 14.1% in December 2020, up from 3.3% in December 2019¹¹
- In Victoria 69,004 properties were likely vacant in 2019 able to house over 185,000 people¹²
- The waiting list for public housing in Victoria was over 80,000 in 2019
- As part of COVID19 relief measures, the Victorian Government waived the Vacant Land Tax for 2020-2021 and has yet to be reinstated.¹³

Homelessness

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that the government was able to reverse the homelessness crisis overnight, yet once the health risks subsided, thousands of Victoria's rough sleepers were thrown back out on the street¹⁴.

- The Victorian Government's \$150m 'Homelessness to Home' package promised an extra \$50m emergency accommodation to extend until April 2021¹⁵
- Out of a promised 1,200 head tenancy leases, no evidence has been provided to show a single lease has been granted to this date

¹⁰ Clegg, J. (2020). Melbourne's empty rentals soar by 20 per cent in one month, other capitals hold strong. [online] Domain. Available at: <https://www.domain.com.au/news/melbourne-rent-vacancy-rates-rise-as-the-rest-of-the-country-fares-better-983295/> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2021]

¹¹ Needham, J. (2021). *Melbourne rents: Short-term listing hosts return properties to rental market, putting downward pressure on prices*. [online] Domain. Available at: <https://www.domain.com.au/news/melbourne-rents-short-term-listing-hosts-return-properties-to-rental-market-putting-downward-pressure-on-prices-1018396/> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2021].

¹² Speculative Vacancies 10: A Persistent Puzzle (2019 data, released 2020) (by Karl Fitzgerald) https://www.prosper.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Prosper_SpeculativeVacancies_FINAL_web23.pdf

¹³ <https://www.sro.vic.gov.au/vacant-residential-land-tax>

¹⁴ Fears for Melbourne's homeless forced out of Covid hotel accommodation - M. Boseley, Guardian, December 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/02/fears-for-melbournes-homeless-forced-out-of-covid-hotel-accommodation>

¹⁵ Homes For Homeless Victorians During Pandemic And Beyond, 28 July 2020 <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/homes-homeless-victorians-during-pandemic-and-beyond>



- Victoria spends less than 58% of the national average per capita in social housing as of 2018-2019¹⁶
- In 2018-19, Victorian homelessness services turned away 105 people every day, an increase from 90 per day in 2017-18¹⁷
- In June 2021, The Federal Government is proposing to cut \$57 million from homelessness support services back to pre-Equal Remuneration Order supplementation levels¹⁸

The need to extend protections

The COVID-19 Omnibus Bill has shown the need for rental protections and reduction schemes due to the economic impacts of the pandemic. Morally and legally, there are strong recommendations for increased protections for renters.

- Up to 973,000 renters (nationwide) are at risk of losing their homes. Specific to Victoria, with 1,676,000 people in rental accommodation, between 84,000 and 251,000 renters are at risk.¹⁹
- Over one in twenty renters received a Notice To Vacate during the moratorium period.²⁰
- In their 2020 report²¹, the Federation of Community Legal Centres (FCLC) recommended extensions to rental protections including
 - Legal mechanisms for waiving rental debt
 - A transitional reduction scheme until at least September 2021
 - Retain protections to prevent tenancy database listings where the tenant was unable to pay their rent due to a COVID-19 reason.

¹⁶ Victoria's Homelessness Response Audit, 17 Sep. 2020

<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/victorias-homelessness-response?section=>

¹⁷ Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia, June 2020 VCOSS

https://vcoss.org.au/policylibrary/2020/06/submission-to-the-inquiry-into-homelessness-in-australia/#_ftn4

¹⁸

https://www.insights.uca.org.au/homelessness-charities-warn-against-government-funding-cuts-to-homelessness-services/#_ftn1

¹⁹ Dignam, J., Daniels, I. "Til debt do us part: a fair solution to prevent Covid evictions" Canberra, November 2020

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/betterrenting/pages/315/attachments/original/1606384096/Til_Debt_Do_Us_Part_v3.2.pdf?1606384096

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ 'A Just and Equitable COVID Recovery - A Community Legal Sector Plan for Victoria' 2020 FCLC Victoria https://www.fclc.org.au/just_and_equitable_victoria