

Why “A more Federated RAHU”

Why I am proposing we make it so Branch Bylaws Override Governing Committee set by laws, and why YOU should vote yes for it.

By: William van den Wall Bake

In any forest, when it grows, it must spread itself with diversity of independent species. Each tree must individually adapt itself to the unique environment terrain and space it occupies. Its roots must manoeuvre and find ways to get the nutrition and water that it needs. If a forest were to have identical species the trees themselves become a monoculture. They aren't as resilient as a forest of diversity, and potentially miss out on critical nutrition, and potential for experimentation. It risks the forest itself withering, and if a single disease comes in it wipes out the entire monocultural forest. A singular dictation of a forest, with singular species and planted locations does not and can never work in the long term. It works initially, but cannot be sustained forever.¹

While this metaphor is dubiously related, I believe it's what RAHU is today. A monoculture forest can grow, and the saplings planted in Victoria have grown and themselves has spread its saplings from one side of so-called Australia to the other. From Boorloo to Naarm to land of the Kombumerri people, Renters are using the RAHU to organise and plant their own metaphorical tree. As we have grown, we can foresee the structure of RAHU needs to evolve to match our ambition. The current constitution was written for a smaller, more centralised union. It worked well to get where we are today, but as branches keep popping up across the country, the need for branch autonomy is becoming greater and greater. Its time to allow for a diversification of our forest.

This is why I proposed these amendments under “Proposal for a more Federated RAHU”. The proposed amendments are a crucial update to empower our branches, protect our democratic spirit, and prepare us for the future. This isn't about creating conflict between the Governing Committee and branches. It's about building a clear, democratic, and resilient framework for a truly national union.

The core of a strong union, any strong and competent and militant union, is that power of its local members to act on the issues that matter most to them. This proposal entrenches that principle in our constitution.

Branches will have the clear power to create their own by-laws tailored to local campaigns, landlord tactics, state-based legislation and the make up of members. Branches shouldn't need to fight for the autonomy to act, and ask for exemptions. This proposal grants them this autonomy, while still holding them to the spirit of the RAHU constitution. This is real, de-jure autonomy, not just de-facto autonomy as allowed for by the secretary or leadership of the day.

¹ This entire section is based on the opening chapter of “Seeing Like A State” by James C Scott

A healthy democracy needs checks and balances. This proposal clearly defines the limits of the Governing Committee's power, preventing potential future overreach and cutting down on bureaucracy.

The old rule 12(4) was a broad "override" clause. The new one specifies *when* and *on what matters* the Governing Committee's interpretation prevails (e.g., constitutional interpretation, expulsions). This prevents a scenario where a future Governing Committee could casually override a branch's democratic decisions on a whim. But still allows for the Governing Committee to step in when required.

We need less bureaucracy and more organising. The current process for branches to do anything that might contradict a GC by-law is cumbersome. An exemption process just feels like a lot of effort and more bureaucracy to wade through. This change replaces a permission-based system with a principles-based one, freeing up organisers' time for what matters: building power for renters.

We are building a union not just for today, but for the next decade and beyond. This structure is designed for growth and stability. Under the new model, if the Governing Committee passes a well-intentioned but poorly worded General Bylaw, it doesn't automatically cripple every branch. Branches can maintain their own effective rules while the issue is fixed at a national level. This means less time has to be spent by every branch checking and double-checking every single Governing Committee decision for unintended consequences.

It is also essential for Growth and affiliation. If we want SEQUR to ever affiliate, I am of the opinion that they will not find the current status quo of Governing Committee primacy acceptable. To bring all renters into one big union, we must be a union that respects the autonomy of its constituent parts. This federated model is the standard for successful, large-scale democratic organisations. We cannot have such a centralised union otherwise.

A person at an event talks to RAHU member, and says their keen to join, but (perhaps fairly or unfairly) cites drama or an incident in another state or branch. Perhaps the member recruiting knows about this and can present a spirited defence, perhaps they don't and will have to look into it later, but it allows this recruiter to say "well I am not sure about that, but branches in RAHU have the autonomy to be different from each other." While technically true at the moment, it is only in de-factor terms.

This constitution formalises this ability to defer and to present ourselves independent of the mistakes that other branches may or may not have made, and also allows us to bring in members to *educate* them about these mistakes if they are unfairly construing a RAHU branch incorrectly. Half the battle is getting them through the door.

It also allows for greater experimentation and encourages members to write the bylaws for *their* branch and *their* situation. The onus for responsibility of ensuring compatibility of bylaws should fall upon those in the highest positions of the unions, not the enthusiastic member who wishes to make the union for them and *their* comrades.

It is also fundamentally a question of ideology. How can we really call ourselves a “Syndicalist Union” - as in our current constitution – when we have such centralisation. Such centralisation is the anti-thesis of how all syndicalist unions have operated through out history.

There are objections from some - very fair objection I must add – with some worrying about this proposal taking away the ability for Governing Committee to override branches means a dis-empowering of those important equity committees. Disability Committee members specifically has raised issues with the proposal, and fairly enough, the gains and improvements upon the disabled members of RAHU has allowed for the expansion of participation in such meetings.

However, I will remind them that the Governing Committee is still able to suspend branches under Section 12(3) *“The Governing Committee may temporarily limit any power of a branch for 30 days.”* Further if the Governing Committee does see a branch consistently ignore and not follow the bylaws and wishes of these committees, under Section 18(1) the Governing Committee can still vote to dissolve such a branch.

Let’s also not forget, that as a whole, the Governing Committee is a body of all branches and must set by-laws for all branches. There is perhaps branches that would *want* to adopt a more progressive version of certain bylaws, but would be unable to due to how the committee is setup. A literal example of this is a recent by laws strict down in the WA branch, which actually created stricter version of the clean air policy, but was not able to be followed due to how the current constitution is setup.

Additionally, all branches are still beholden to the RAHU constitution itself. The common line voted for by the common membership. If a rule is important enough, it can be set in stone at an Annual General Meeting.

Fundamentally we have a choice. We address this issue now, and take early steps to ensure branches can make decisions and fight for themselves, or we can delay and wait and risk creating a division of renters. This proposal strikes a careful and powerful balance. It gives branches the freedom to be agile and militant in their local context, while maintaining national unity through a common constitution, ideology and clear, powers for the Governing Committee. It builds a RAHU that is ready to grow, ready to fight, and truly owned by its members in every state.

Renters in Australia cannot afford for a new forest to split off. If we want to get every renter in a common singular, national union, we must adopt these changes.

So, let’s plant some saplings shall we?