



Federer out of
Masters Cup after
Murray epic

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Feeling the pinch:
Coping with the
credit crunch

Unions call for rates revision

Over 2,000
attend rally

Cynthia Busuttil

Trade unions yesterday asked the government to go back to the negotiation table and revise the water and electricity tariffs, as they united for the first time around a common cause.

But although the protest was considered historic because it brought together 20 trade unions, the number of people attending was nowhere near the thousands who turned up for a manifestation on the same issue organised by the Labour Party last Sunday.

Around 2,000 braved the drizzle and ominous clouds to protest against the tariffs, approving a resolution saying the new bills will undermine the standard of living.

Read out by General Workers' Union general secretary Tony Zarb to resounding applause, the resolution called on the government to reopen discussions with union representatives. It was approved symbolically, through a show of hands.

On Thursday, the Chamber For Small And Medium Enterprises - GRTU which said it understood the aim behind the protest but would not attend as it was not its practice, made a similar call through a letter addressed to the Prime Minister.

Lawrence Gonzi accepted the invitation and the two should meet some time next week.

The new tariffs, which will see the bills for water and electricity of most households increase markedly, have fuelled the ire of unions who believe the authorities undermined social dialogue during the discussion process.



Union leaders (front row, from left) MUT president John Benigni; GWU officials Heien Mallia; vice president Gejtu Mercieca, deputy general secretary Tony Zarb, general secretary UHM general secretary, Gejtu Vella and president Gejtu Tanti march together during a historic joint protest in Valletta, yesterday. Photo: Matthew Mirabelli

Carrying placards reading "no" to the new tariffs, burdens and shocks, workers and pensioners marched behind the union leaders as the sound of Bob Marley's song Get Up, Stand Up and John Lennon's Power to the People blared from loudspeakers.

Yesterday's protest replaced one planned for Thursday by the General Workers' Union. Last Tuesday the unions announced they would

be joining forces to voice their discontent at the hike in water and electricity rates and the way the government has undermined social dialogue.

Stepping up onto a stage set up in Merchants Street, *Union Had-diemu Magħqudin* general secretary Gejtu Vella said the unions had called the protest to send the government a clear sign that the tariffs have to be revised.

"We all believe that the national interest is nobody's monopoly," he said, adding that the water and electricity bills were a national issue.

Among those present at the protest was former Prime Minister Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici.

Alternattiva Demokratika congratulated the unions for organising a "historic demonstration" adding that they should build on

this by forming a Trade Unions' Council.

AD social and economic development spokesman Michael Briguglio said that through such a council, workers' rights would be defended and promoted through a collective movement that respects the identity of each union.

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