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UNIONS UNITED

Historical alliance against government's utility tariffs

KARL SCHEMBRI

ALL of Malta's trade unions have decided to team up for one massive demonstration against government's announced water and electricity tariffs on Friday, in a historic and unprecedented show of unity.

Announcing the decision yesterday, the leaders of the General Workers' Union and Union Haddiema Maghqudin, flanked by other unionists, heralded the news as "a historic moment" and "a milestone" in Maltese trade unionism that could pave the way for further cooperation.

The decision was taken after a day of discussions among union leaders upon the invitation of UHM to GWU to move its demonstration from Thursday to Friday, while roping in all the other unions.

FIRST OF ITS KIND
UHM and GWU bosses Gejtu Vella (left) and Tony Zarb (right) will form an unprecedented united front on Friday

Both union leaders said there were no preconditions in the talks between them to hold one demonstration, and the day was only moved to Friday as the UHM leader will be abroad on Thursday.

"You are living a historic moment in the trade union sector," GWU secretary-general Tony Zarb said at a hastily called press conference held at Osborne Hotel yesterday afternoon, at the end of the talks.

"You can now understand why we are beaming with satisfaction. We hope our call will now be heeded. Hopefully this will also be a step forward for the future of a united trade union front."

UHM secretary-general Gejtu Vella said the decision to unite should send a clear message of protest to government against the way it had abandoned social dialogue on water and electricity tariffs.

"Government has to realise that all unions on the MCESD are social partners as much as the government is," Vella said. "The moment government thinks it is above them, that's when it starts undermining constructive social dialogue... Ours is a clear message to the government that it has no monopoly over the national interest. We also hold the national interest dearly, so our views have to be taken in all seriousness. We hope Friday's demonstration will be enough for

government to realise this."

Vella, who had earlier last week described protesting in the streets as "a last resort", said his union's decision to take to the streets came after it had "exhausted all avenues".

"We've used all means at our disposal," Vella said. "So now we are resorting to the streets."

William Portelli, who heads the Confederation of Malta Trade Unions as well as the bank employees' union, MUBE, said no union could back out of such a historic event.

"We couldn't but support such a demonstration of unity," he said, also expressing his hopes for a long-lasting united front. "If there's one

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Labour to raise VAT refund on cars with European Commission

THE Malta Labour Party is expected to appeal to the European Commission in its campaign for people who paid VAT on the vehicle registration tax to get their money back.

Labour leader Joseph Muscat told Parliament on Monday that government was duty bound to refund "this illegal

tax" that was imposed since Malta's EU membership in May 2004.

"I say that if government wants to show how consumers can benefit from EU membership, it should give back this illegal tax that it was imposing in breach of European regulations," Muscat said.

"If it doesn't do this out of its own free

will, the Labour Party is ready to take the initiative itself on behalf of these consumers to take back what was taken from them by this government."

Finance Minister Tonio Fenech has already made it clear government will not give any refunds despite the European Commission's ruling that the tax was il-

legal.

Contacted yesterday, Muscat did not rule out making the case with the European Commission but said he will be announcing details of the campaign "in the coming weeks".

"I hope we won't have to resort to telling the

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