



Vincenzo Conticello, owner of Antica Focacceria San Francesco sandwich restaurant poses in front of his property as a security guard watches over him, at right, and Carabinieri paramilitary police, seen at left, guard the restaurant, in downtown Palermo, Sicily, southern Italy, in this Oct. 5, 2007 photo. In a rebellion shaking the Sicilian Mafia to its centuries-old roots, businesses in growing numbers are refusing to submit to demands for protection money called "pizzo" _ threatening to sap an already weakened crime syndicate of one of its steadiest sources of revenue. (AP Photo/Alessandro Fucarini)

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Web, Crackdowns Weakening Mafia's Grip

By FRANCES D'EMILIO – 7 hours ago

PALERMO, Sicily (AP) — When it came down to business, Cosa Nostra could always count on fear. No more. In a rebellion shaking the Sicilian Mafia to its centuries-old roots, businesses are joining forces in refusing to submit to demands for protection money called "pizzo."

And they're getting away with it, threatening to sap an already weakened crime syndicate of one of its steadiest sources of revenue.

The Mafia has a history of bouncing back from defeat, but this time it is up against something entirely new: a Web site where businessmen are finding safety in numbers to say no to the mob.

At the same time, businessmen ranging from neighborhood shopkeepers to industrialists are being emboldened by arrests of fugitive bosses, and the discovery in raids of meticulous Mafia bookkeeping on who paid the "pizzo" and how much.

"This rebellion goes to the heart of the Mafia," said Palermo prosecutor Maurizio De Lucia, who has investigated extortion cases for years. "If it works, we will have a great advantage in the fight against the Mafia."

These latest gains build on other successes in the fight to break Cosa Nostra's stranglehold on Sicily. In the last two decades, the syndicate has been battered by testimony from turncoats, who helped send hundreds of mobsters to prison in the late 1980s, and a fierce state crackdown a decade later after bombs killed two Palermo anti-Mafia prosecutors.

The number of rebels on the Web site is still tiny compared to Palermo's businesses overall, but their movement has helped to chip away at the Mafia's psychological hold on Sicilians — long conditioned to believe that defiance would bring ruin or a death sentence. And any consistent crumbling of that culture of fear could ultimately lead to Cosa Nostra's undoing.

The businesses are openly defying the Mafia by signing on to a Web site called "Addiopizzo" (Goodbye Pizzo), which brings together businesses in the Sicilian capital that are resisting extortion.

The campaign was launched in 2004 by a group of youths thinking of opening a pub. They started off by plastering Palermo with anti-pizzo fliers, reading "An ENTIRE PEOPLE WHO PAYS THE PIZZO IS A PEOPLE WITHOUT DIGNITY," and eventually brought their campaign online where it struck a profound chord with Sicilians fed up with Mafia bullying.

Confindustria, the industrialists' lobby, has also boosted the movement with a threat to expel members who pay protection money. Its Sicilian branch has gone through a list of pizzo-paying companies found in a raid on a top Mafia boss' hideout, and this month began summoning heads of those companies to demand to know if they indeed had been paying and should be drummed out of the politically influential lobby.

In one case, the director of a private clinic said her institution wound up on Cosa Nostra's list because a mobster was treated there, although it apparently was unclear during his hospitalization that he was a Mafioso.

At the same time, authorities are ratcheting up the pressure on business owners, aggressively prosecuting those who refuse to testify against the Mafia in clear-cut cases of extortion. Under Italian law, a businessman who denies paying up despite flagrant evidence — such as being caught on a surveillance tape — can be charged with "aiding and abetting" Cosa Nostra.

"Now it is a bigger risk for us to pay than not to pay," said Ugo Argiroffi, an engineer who recently added his Palermo construction company, C.O.C.I. to Addiopizzo's list (<http://www.addiopizzo.org> in Italian with an English link).

While the nearly 230 businesses on the list are only a fraction of Palermo's thousands of stores, offices and factories, a similar group has sprouted up in Catania, Sicily's second-largest city.

Perhaps most significant, the rebellion has taken root in strongholds of the most ruthless Mafia clans — places such as Gela, a drab, industrial coastal town. Some 80 Gela businessmen in recent months have denounced extortion attempts.

It is a dramatic turn since the early '90s, when a Gela merchant who denounced extortion was slain by the Mafia, and a Gela car dealer, whose showroom was repeatedly torched, had to move his family and change his name after he testified in court.

In another prominent case, Libero Grassi, who had a Palermo clothing business, was gunned

down by the Mafia in 1991 after he made a futile public plea for other merchants to join him in denouncing extortion.

Prosecutors trace the extortion rebellion back to the scramble for power after Bernardo Provenzano, the alleged "boss of bosses," was captured last year near his hometown of Corleone.

For years, Provenzano — who reputedly took the helm of Cosa Nostra in 1993 — had employed an extortion strategy of "let them pay a little but make everyone pay," according to Piero Grasso, a former Palermo prosecutor who is now Italy's national anti-Mafia prosecutor based in Rome.

The Mafia chief feared excessive greed and violence would draw a fierce police crackdown, Grasso said in an interview.

But in the struggle to succeed Provenzano, Palermo area boss Salvatore Lo Piccolo ruthlessly dispensed with the low profile.

Under Lo Piccolo, according to Grasso, the small army of henchmen who shake down merchants was doubled, from 500 to 1,000 men, judging from entries in confiscated extortion ledgers.

The extortionists received monthly "salaries" worth \$3,000, generous by Sicily's standards, plus an extra month's pay as a Christmas bonus, Grasso said.

A rash of arson attacks on businesses this past year apparently reflected Lo Piccolo's determination to press extortion demands.

The strategy appears to have backfired: The harder the Mafia squeezed, the more their victims resisted. Crucially, no businessmen or their relatives have thus far been killed for their defiance, although some may have lost Mafia-wary customers.

In one high-profile case, Vincenzo Conticello, owner of Antica Focacceria San Francesco, a landmark Palermo restaurant that specializes in sandwiches stuffed with calf's spleen and lung, spent \$1.8 million buying supplies from "friends" of a gangster who had elbowed into his business.

Eventually the restaurateur got fed up and went to police. At the trial, he pointed out the three gangsters who had extorted him and in November they were jailed for 10 to 16 years. Conticello was granted police protection.

When Mafia boss Lo Piccolo was arrested in November outside Palermo, police found a list of hundreds of names of those who paid the "pizzo" plus a breakdown of how the money was divvied up — a treasure trove of information on how the mob operates.

In December, police scored another coup when they shot dead Daniele Emmanuello, the reputed boss of the Gela area's extortion rackets, as he fled from a farmhouse hideout.

Emmanuello didn't take time to change out of his pajamas, but he did swallow some handwritten notes. Authorities are examining them for more information on the pizzo racket.

Until now, the money figures had been largely guesswork. But taking advantage of the confiscated Mafia ledgers, Antonio La Spina, a University of Palermo sociology professor, has pieced together the clearest picture for a report given to The Associated Press before its publication this week in a book called "The Costs of Illegality."

His researchers calculate the pizzo payments averaging \$1,200 a month add up to nearly \$260 million in Palermo province alone.

"For a street vendor, 'pizzo' ranges from 50 to 100 euros a month, a neighborhood bread store 150-250 euros, a simple clothing store 250 euros, a jewelry store, 1,000 euros, your local mini-mart 500 euros," said Attilio Scaglione, one of the researchers. A euro is worth roughly \$1.50.

These days, the Mafia appears to be trying to pick symbolic targets rather than punish the pizzo-refusers en masse.

At Rodolfo Guajana's company, a wholesaler for hardware stores across Sicily since 1875, attackers this summer punched a hole in the roof, poured in gasoline and torched the warehouse.

Guajana believes the Mafia attacked him because it was known that his family had a history of refusing to pay.

"What happened here was the Mafia was saying to all merchants: 'What happened to Guajana can happen to you if you don't pay,'" said Guajana.

Across the island in Agrigento, industrialist Salvatore Moncada described himself as proof businessmen can stand up to mobsters.

He has repeatedly refused demands made of his 180-employee company, Moncada

Costruzioni Srl, Italy's fifth-largest producer of wind energy. In one case, Moncada's testimony helped jail a mobster who demanded \$7,500.

At one point, Moncada wore a wire to a meeting with a mobster. "I was sweating a little bit," he recalled. But no threats were made and the gangster wasn't arrested.

But Moncada said he can understand why some businessmen decide it pays to pay off the Mafia.

A pizzo of 2 percent of a contract's value is a lot less than the price of a 24-hour guard, he said. "In the end you say, 'Sorry, I'll pay and that's that.'"

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