

[Watch](#) ONE-MINUTE WORLD NEWS

Page last updated at 08:56 GMT, Friday, 11 April 2008 09:56 UK

[E-mail this to a friend](#)[Printable version](#)

Sicilians grow defiant of Mafia

By Stephanie Holmes
BBC News, Palermo

In the Cosa Nostra's stronghold of Palermo, Sicily's sprawling port capital, the Mafia have ways and means of knowing if you are turning a profit. And inevitably they want a cut.

"It starts with them glueing over your keyhole," explains Cecile Lambert, a young member of an association, Addiopizzo, that aims to free the city's shopkeepers from the tyranny of extortion payments. "That's a clear signal that they are looking for the *pizzo*."



Cecile Lambert wants to rid Sicily of its Mafia connotations

The *pizzo* - or protection money - is paid monthly and the sum is even negotiable. If you are unable, or unwilling, to interpret the Cosa Nostra's symbolic language then they are usually more than happy to make it clearer.

"You might find your shop window smashed, or even your car set on fire," she explains. But at last the old ways are being challenged.

Cosa Nostra is the name of the Sicilian Mafia - one of several mafias operating in southern Italy.

Italian government figures suggest that 70% of all Sicilian businesses - from the scruffiest tobacconist on the street corner to a multinational exporter - pay some money into the Mafia's racket.

It has taken years for politicians and business leaders even to openly acknowledge that what locals call "the system" even exists.

Secret society

One of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's fiercest critics, Marco Travaglio, suggests that the Mafia has always been the elephant in the room of Italian politics. "These issues are hidden up in the attic, like slightly mad relatives - they are never mentioned," he says.

"It was thought that whoever talks about fighting the Mafia... scares a certain segment of the electorate, and that it smacks of extremism. There is this misunderstood moderation, which is actually appeasement. In reality, if you don't talk about the Mafia, it is because you want Mafia votes."



Palermo's traditional tolerance of Mafia intimidation may be ending

But the success of grassroots movements like Addiopizzo has changed that. It is led by a generation whose adolescence was punctured by the multiple murders of anti-Mafia judges, journalists and entrepreneurs.

The Cosa Nostra has also suffered a series of wounding blows, including the arrest of several high-profile bosses who had spent years on the run - Bernardo Provenzano and Salvatore Lo Piccolo.

Centre-left candidate Walter Veltroni has now spoken of being part of "a political force which will destroy the criminality that saps energy

SEE ALSO

- [Sicily Mafia 'restoring US links'](#)
27 Feb 08 | Europe
- [The challenge of breaking the Mafia](#)
05 Nov 07 | Europe
- [Italian Mafia turnover '\\$120bn'](#)
22 Oct 07 | Europe
- [Mafia men get 300 years in jail](#)
16 Nov 06 | Europe
- [Sicilian anti-Mafia raids net 45](#)
20 Jun 06 | Europe
- ['Top Mafia boss' caught in Italy](#)
11 Apr 06 | Europe
- [Profile: Bernardo Provenzano](#)
11 Apr 06 | Europe

RELATED INTERNET LINKS

- [Addiopizzo](#)
- [La Coppola Storta](#)

The BBC is not responsible for the content of external internet sites

TOP EUROPE STORIES

- [Symbolic Cyprus border crossing](#)
- [Europe rejects anti-piracy plans](#)
- [Trans-Dniester in landmark talks](#)

[RSS](#) | [News feeds](#)

MOST POPULAR STORIES NOW

[E-MAILED](#) [READ](#) [WATCHED/LISTENED](#)

- [Nude image of Carla Bruni sold](#)
- [Video embarrassment for Wal-Mart](#)
- [Day in pictures](#)
- [Map reveals key wildlife hotspots](#)
- [Zimbabwe bans political rallies](#)

[Most popular now, in detail](#)

News Front Page

[Africa](#)[Americas](#)[Asia-Pacific](#)[Europe](#)[Middle East](#)[South Asia](#)[UK](#)[Business](#)[Health](#)[Science/Nature](#)[Technology](#)[Entertainment](#)[Also in the news](#)[Video and Audio](#)[Have Your Say](#)[In Pictures](#)[Country Profiles](#)[Special Reports](#)[Related BBC sites](#)[Sport](#)[Weather](#)[Editors' Blog](#)[BBC World Service](#)[Site Version](#)[UK Version](#)[International Version](#)[About the versions](#)[LANGUAGES](#)

from this land" and Mr Berlusconi has said his party is "incompatible" with the Mafia, pointing to the series of arrests during his time in office.

Angelino Alfano, a 37-year-old MP within Mr Berlusconi's People of Freedom alliance says the sea-change on the streets of Palermo, with companies refusing to pay into the racket, represents "the end of an era of fear."

"Too many firms still pay the pizzo, but there has been a massive rebellion. A lot of companies have decided to trust the state and believe the state will protect them."

The work of the city's committed young people has been matched by powerful industrial associations, like Confindustria, which has thrown its weight behind the campaign, announcing six months ago that any of its members found to be paying the pizzo would be thrown out.

"The pizzo in Sicily became a sort of social custom, it was accepted," says the president of Confindustria, Ivan Lo Bello. "Now there is a sort of social shame attached, the perception has changed."

Olive oil and cloth caps

In a side-street of old Palermo, where dark alleys open on to piazzas planted with palm trees, 29-year-old Fabio Messina helps run the first anti-Mafia emporium.

Its walls are painted orange and its shelves are stacked with Sicily's famous Nero d'Avola wine, olive oil and organic pasta.

All the products come either from land confiscated from the Mafia, or have been made by producers, artisans or importers who have refused to pay up.



A young Sicilian couple sell Mafia-free merchandise

"This used to be the type of cap often worn by mafiosi, they'd wear it straight, like this," Mr Messina says of the brightly coloured caps near the entrance, pulling one over his unruly hair.

"But the company is called *La Coppola Storta* (Jaunty Cap) because we wear it differently, at an angle. It's about reclaiming and re-interpreting a symbol, giving it a positive meaning."

Adiopizzo is a resolutely apolitical organisation set up in 2004 which offers practical, psychological and legal support to shopkeepers and local businesses who decide to say no. So far, more than 250 businesses have signed up and the numbers continue to grow.

They also take their message about the importance of playing by state rules directly into classrooms, receiving some funding from the education ministry for these projects.

"Customers like the fact that, in this shop, they can actually make a statement each time they buy a product," Mr Messina says.

'Dear Extortionist'

One of the first to refuse to pay protection money in Palermo was Libero, the late husband of 79-year-old Pina Grassi.

Her son manages an offshoot of a family-run textiles firm whose spectacular success throughout the 1980s and 1990s had the mafiosi circling like flies.

Of the gradually escalating threats she received, one stands out in her memory: "Once, they stole our dog," she remembers.



Restaurant boss Fabio Conticello refused to be bullied by the Mafia

"He was dumped later at the gates of our factory - skin and bone, almost starved to death."

Refusing to accept the idea that the company he had created would

enrich people who refused to work, Libero Grassi wrote an open letter to the *Giornale di Sicilia*, the local newspaper.

Published on the front page in August 1991, it was addressed to an anonymous "Dear Extortionist". It caused a sensation but, barely three weeks later, Libero was dead.

"He was going to open the factory again after the summer break," Mrs Grassi recounts. "He left the house at 0730 in the morning. They knew he was coming. They shot him five times from a car."

Now, saying no to the racket is far less risky, thanks to what Mrs Grassi calls the "collective conscience" of the young people of Addiopizzo. Yet it remains an act of defiance.

"It's been a very long road to get here," says Fabio Conticello, the owner of the Focceria San Francesco. People are busy tucking into traditional Palermo street food and his establishment's speciality - *la milza*, or sliced lung and intestines, cooked in lard, topped with salty cheese and served in a bap.

It might not sound too tempting but the Mafia were soon licking their lips.


"A man came to the restaurant and said, 'Well, you know why I'm here'. He wanted some protection money. I thought about it briefly and then we said no.

"The man was shocked, nobody says 'no'. He even started trying to negotiate a price with us. We just repeated: 'No, we're not paying'."

His family had noted down the number of his scooter and, with the help of the Palermo police, they managed to unravel the whole of the Cosa Nostra's local network and the rest of his gang.

As we turn to leave the old part of the city, Andrea Cottone, of Addiopizzo, reminds us of a quotation from one of Sicily's most famous writers: "Everything must change so that things can stay the same".

His organisation might have proven the writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrong.

 [E-mail this to a friend](#)

 [Printable version](#)

Bookmark with:

[What are these?](#)

[Delicious](#)

[Digg](#)

[reddit](#)

[Facebook](#)

[StumbleUpon](#)

FEATURES, VIEWS, ANALYSIS



[Tough on crime](#)

How Sicilians broke the Cosa Nostra's stranglehold



[Day in pictures](#)

Striking images from around the world



[Against the grain](#)

US farmers do not get full benefit of rice price rises

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

[E-mail news](#)

[Mobiles](#)

[Alerts](#)

[News feeds](#)

[Podcasts](#)

 © MMVIII

The BBC is not responsible for the content of external internet sites.

[News Sources](#)
[About BBC News](#)

[About the BBC](#)
[BBC Help](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Accessibility Help](#)
[Terms of Use](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Privacy & Cookies](#)
[Advertise with us](#)