

## Sicily Provinces

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## Pizzo Guys Nabbed As Victims React

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More than 20 Cosa Nostra bag men were picked up Monday in a fresh sign that victims of protection rackets are rebelling against the Mob.

It was believed to be the first time that such a large group of racket enforcers were detained on the word of the people they had been preying on. Police said 21 men were taken into custody on suspicion of acting as collectors in Palermo of the 'pizzo' or Mafia fee for 'protecting' one's business.

Business owners had confirmed a raft of information found at the hide-out of Cosa

Nostra chief Salvatore Lo Piccolo when he was arrested in November, police said. Informants also had a lead role in the sweep.

The operation also shed light on "the people who planned, organised and carried out" an arson attack that destroyed a local business in July, police said.

"It is possible to get free of the rackets as long as we act together," said two of Italy's leading anti-pizzo campaigners, Tano Grasso of Italy's Anti-Racket Federation and Enrico Colajanni of Libero Futuro-Addiopizzo (Free Future-Goodbye Pizzo).

Addio Pizzo has been fighting racketeering and extortion for four years.

In a joint statement, Grasso and Colajanni stressed the police operation was helped by "the significant cooperation" of many business people assisted by their organisations. "For some time now we have been seeing signs of exasperation among businessmen and women who have been subjected to the pizzo for years.

"We have been able to use this new awareness in order to increase faith in the institutions, building confidence that it is possible to shrug off the yoke of the rackets".

Cracks have recently started to appear in the wall of silence that normally protects the protection rackets, Grasso said recently.

"These are small steps that make a breach in the wall of omerta' which is still very strong," he said.

In a bid to dent the Mafia's control over commerce and business, the Sicilian branch of the powerful industrial employers' federation Confindustria has said it will eject members caught paying the 'pizzo'.

Confindustria has been contacting businessmen mentioned in a log-book seized from Lo Piccolo on November 5.

The businesses have had to choose between going to the police or being thrown out.

Confindustria's retail and small-business counterpart, Confcommercio, recently followed suit. Despite the apparent progress, Grasso said there was still a long way to go in breaking the ties between business and the Mob.

"It's hard to persuade the big businesses because, apart from the fear element, what comes into play is an interest in doing business with the Mafia," he said.

The head of parliament's anti-Mafia commission, Francesco Forgione, insisted that shopkeepers and owners of small companies had everything to gain from reporting the Mafia to police.

He said Cosa Nostra was struggling after the arrests of its last two chiefs "and this is the time to deliver a powerful blow".

Mafia extortion rackets are rife in southern Italy and particularly Sicily where in some cities like the capital, at least six out of ten shopkeepers are believed to pay the Mob tax.

Before Monday's operation, less than 20 Palermo businessmen had come forward to report pizzo-extorting Mafiosi.

According to a report last year by national retailers' association Confesercenti, the Mafia wrings 200 million euros a day from Italian businesses through the pizzo, loan sharking and other crimes.

The report said organised crime groups raked in 80 million euros every day from shopkeepers alone.

Earlier this month shoppers in the Sicilian capital of Palermo got the chance to thumb their noses at the Mafia by taking their custom to a supermarket with solid racketeering-free credentials.

The store, set up by Addiopizzo, only stocks goods by businesses that have publicly refused to pay the pizzo.

It started with a secret campaign plastering Palermo with anti-racketeering stickers. When Addiopizzo eventually went public, numerous businesses joined up.

The organization then began publishing a list of those businesses that pledged to stand up to racketeers - an immediate hit with the public, delighted at the chance of keeping their hard-earned cash out of Mob pockets.

One young businessman, Fabio Messina, decided the scheme could be taken a step further.

"I decided it was right to give those traders who refuse to pay protection money an extra opportunity," the 29-year-old said.

"The store also makes things easier for shoppers, because instead of travelling all over Palermo, going from one place to another, they can buy everything they need at a single outlet".

So far, 30 businesses on the association's 241-strong list are involved in one way or another in the store on Corso Vittorio Emanuele in the heart of Palermo.

Addiopizzo hopes the supermarket will become a flagship in its campaign to free Sicilian society from its Mafia stranglehold.

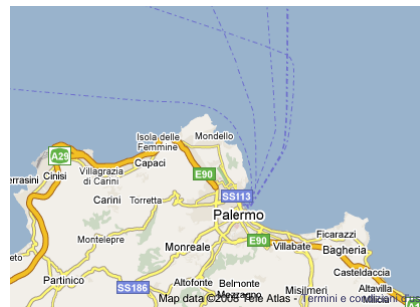
The association believes that resigned acceptance of organized crime has allowed it to flourish, while change will only come if the public believes it has a choice.

The pizzo-free supermarket was greeted warmly Confindustria which said more such stores could be opened in other parts of Palermo and elsewhere.

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