

An offer the brave few can refuse

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By Stephen Brown

When the Sicilian Mafia first tried to shake down restaurateur Vincenzo Conticello for €500 (\$965) a month, he quoted his grandmother Ermelinda at them: "Don't start paying up or you will always be a servant, never a free man."

Unconvinced by his late granny's reason for not paying the "pizzo" – protection money handed over throughout southern Italy and by up to eight out of 10 businesses in parts of Sicily – the Mafia hit back with death threats and a demand for €50,000.

A member of the fifth generation of Conticellos to run Palermo's Antica Focacceria San Francesco, the 48-year-old stood up in court and pointed the finger at the men he said tried to force him to pay up.

"If I had paid up, my grandmother would have turned in her grave," said Conticello, one of a tiny band of business people who, partly inspired by anti-racket youth movements such as "www.addiopizzo.org" ("goodbye pizzo"), have taken a stand.

They cannot even dent the mob's earnings. It is estimated that Italian crime syndicates – the Cosa Nostra, the Camorra in Naples and the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria – earn €75 billion a year from the protection racket and loan sharking.

But they hope to inspire others and eventually deprive the mob of an easy and low-risk source of cash.

"If the Mafia exists, it exists because businesses pay up," said Tano Grasso, who set up the first anti-racket group in 1990 after refusing to pay protection money for his clothing firm.

Some pay a high price for refusing to pay, none more so than Palermo merchant Libero Grassi, who was shot dead in 1991.

Conticello has an armed police escort. Others have had their premises burned down or bombed, like builder Andrea Vecchio who suffered four fire-bomb attacks in four days.

Mafia experts say the revolt against the racket coincides with a leadership vacuum in the Mafia since the 2006 arrest of "boss of bosses" Bernardo Provenzano. Now ambitious mafiosi on the outside want to prove themselves by enforcing the pizzo.

"In Sicily there's a new aggression in their reaction due to the lack of leadership, and also the fact that they need money," Grasso, head of the anti-pizzo movement (www.antiracket.it), said from Naples, where he campaigns against the Camorra.

"I can't forecast what will happen but we definitely have to be very worried."

A study by SOS Impresa, the anti-racket office of the retailers' association, estimates Italian mobsters bleed €200 million a day from businesses through the pizzo and loan sharking, with shopkeepers alone squeezed for €80 million a day.

SOS Impresa chairman Lino Busa says some firms are rebelling against the pizzo "because the Mafia campaign to demand money has got worse and they have been using bombs".

This contrasts with Provenzano's "pax mafiosi" between clans when, Grasso says, the mob would "reason



A bodyguard looks out for Vincenzo Conticello (right) outside his restaurant in Sicily. Photo / Reuters

with businesses to make paying the pizzo seem a reasonable thing to do".

Once the godfathers might have been happy with a discount or a free pizza. But when Conticello marketed his restaurant abroad and business grew, the Mafia's mouth watered for a slice of earnings, not pizza.

Eager to promote Sicilian tourism and cuisine, some local politicians complain that the fuss about the mob is bad publicity.

But unlike the days when business leaders urged each other with fiscal logic "pay up, so we pay less", the employers' lobby Confindustria now threatens to expel members paying the pizzo.

Grassi's widow Pina wants those who do pay up to be prosecuted as Mafia accomplices.

"But such a law will never be passed," she said on a recent anniversary of his death. "The fight against the racket will always be based on the courage of the few."

They are still only a tiny minority.

"In Sicily there are something like 123,000 companies but just 12 of us in this situation," said Conticello. "If instead of 12 of us there were 100 or 1000, it would have an impact."

"But taking out one businessman is very simple. I'm an easy target, even with two policemen following me."

Best-selling Sicilian author Andrea Camilleri made headlines by saying Italy should send in the Army to fight the Mafia. Grasso disagrees. "The Army would be no help at all," he said. "What we need is an army of shopkeepers who denounce this in public."

For that to happen, said Conticello, there must be a change of mentality on an island where "even the dogs are mafiosi".