

Mafia-free supermarket defies mob extortion

By Nick Pisa in Rome

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Shoppers in Sicily have the chance to take on the Mafia after the first racket-free supermarket opened yesterday on the island long dominated by the mob.

Its owner, Fabio Messina, is taking a brave stand against the organisation by stacking his shelves with products only from firms which - like his own - have refused to pay pizzo, the local term for protection money.

"For too long ordinary citizens of Palermo and business people have been held to ransom, and now we are fighting back," said Pasquale Masucci, a computer technician who was one of the store's first customers.

The supermarket, located in the heart of Palermo, is the latest initiative from campaign group Addiopizzo (Goodbye Pizzo) that has been fighting racketeering since 2004.

Its campaign was launched by pasting up posters around the city overnight, bearing the slogan: "A society that pays pizzo is a society without dignity."

Investigators estimate that the Mafia extorts more than £130 million a year from shops and businesses in the Palermo region, with the island as a whole handing over 10 times that figure. The more money a business makes, the more money the Godfathers expect - and those who don't pay up are quickly paid a visit.

It starts with a friendly chat to explain the rules, followed by a nudge such as a brick through the window. If that fails to make the point, a home, business or car might be firebombed.

Small shops are expected to hand over around £100 a month: for supermarkets and jewellers, the going rate is nearer £1,000.

But shoppers and businesses are rebelling, with those refusing to pay adding their names online at the [Addiopizzo website](#). As of yesterday, 241 firms and individuals were listed.

Now Mr Messina, 29, has decided to bring them together by stocking their items in Supermercato Punto Antipizzo - literally, anti-pizzo point supermarket.

He said: "I felt the time had come to give those businesses that had refused to pay the pizzo an extra economic opportunity.

"All the products in the store are supplied by firms who have refused to pay pizzo — we are talking about products from fruit and vegetables to wine, olive oil, pasta and bread. The sort of items you find in any normal supermarket."

Gerlando Mazzone, an optician who is among the anti-Mafia traders, has refused to back down despite suffering several break-ins.

Mr Mazzone said: "I refused to pay the pizzo and the windows were smashed and I lost £230,000 worth of stock.

"I then also noticed my customers were falling away and it broke my heart. I am not ashamed to say I cried every night. But with the help of Addiopizzo I am starting to get back on my feet.

"Of course I could have gone to the local boss, paid the money and got my stock back - but I don't see why I should share my profits with anyone other than my staff."

Centre left senator Francesco Ferrante, who has campaigned against Mafia racketeering, said: "With the opening of this supermarket a new symbol of rebellion and pride has been born from a category that has too often been crushed by Cosa Nostra.

"They have decided to declare war on the racketeers by giving honest citizens the opportunity to fight back against the godfathers with a simple gesture - such as buying from a pizzo free supermarket."

Shoppers in Palermo hope this stand will prove successful. "If everybody does just one thing like this then we are all making a stand against the Mafia," said Mr Masucci's wife Tiziana, a teacher. "I am not afraid to come shopping here and I have told all my friends about it. I wish the owner all the success in the world."

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Fabio Messina (left) in his mob-free shop in Palermo