

We won't pay you protection, traders tell Mafia

By Malcolm Moore in Rome

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A group of 100 shopkeepers in Palermo, the nerve centre of the Sicilian Mafia, have staged an unprecedented rebellion against the Cosa Nostra by refusing to pay protection money.

Until now, almost every business in the Sicilian capital has quietly paid off the Mafia or faced retribution.

But since Bernardo Provenzano, the [73-year-old "boss of all the bosses"](#), was arrested two weeks ago after decades in hiding, the island's anti-Mafia movement has gathered momentum.

advertisement One mobster, Vittorio La Barbera, was sentenced last week to four years and eight months in jail after being caught on camera extracting a "pizzo", or bung, of £1,400 from one business.

The outcome of that trial has emboldened other shop and restaurant owners and 100 small and medium-sized businesses will appear at the University of Palermo next week to declare in public that they will no longer pay up.

"These are the first flames of a revolt," said the newspaper, La Repubblica. "It is a small but great revolution in the capital of Sicily, where quarter after quarter has been suffocated by this tax."

On May 5, or "Pizzo Free" day, the businesses, half of them run by men, half by women, will hold an open-air market for locals to show their solidarity with the movement.

"We are opening up an economic niche for clean business in Palermo," said Francesco Galante, a founder of a movement that is fighting the protection racket.

"Goodbye Pizzo" was started just under two years ago by five graduates who wanted to open a bar in Palermo. Realising they would be asked to pay a Mafia tithe, they decided instead to organise against the pizzo.

The movement plastered posters around Palermo proclaiming: "A population that pays the pizzo is a population without dignity." Now run by 50 people, the group is encouraging shoppers to buy products only from stores that refuse to co-operate with the Mob. More than 7,000 residents have signed up in the past few weeks.

"Other than the first hundred shops, there are lots of others who have decided to not to pay," Mr Galante said. "They just need a little more time to gather up their courage and announce their decision."

Another campaigner, Enrico Colajani, said "The Mafia have not threatened us so far. Perhaps they think we will remain a small group and without influence. The thing they hate the most is public attention."

In the past, Mr Colajani said, Cosa Nostra has not had to work hard to extract its payments. "They might just leave a can of petrol outside a store to show it is in danger. Usually the owners run to find the nearest Mafioso and pay up," he said.

Italy's fight against the Mafia has made huge progress since Provenzano's arrest earlier this month. Notes retrieved from his house have opened a new window on the inner workings of the Mob and shown links with drug cartels in South America.

Yesterday 38 members of the Camorra clan were arrested near Naples in a raid by 500 police officers. More than 200 stolen cars were seized. In Spain, Marco Del Vento, a middle man for Crisafulli Biagio, a gang boss, was arrested.

In Sicily itself, Rita Borsellino, the sister of a leading prosecutor murdered by the Mafia 14 years ago, is running for regional president in elections at the end of May.

The Bishop of Sicily yesterday described the "Mafia sub-culture" as "absolutely irreconcilable with the Gospel and the Christian faith."

In the past there has been a strong link between the Christian Democrats in Sicily and the Mafia. But the bishop's office said the church would tread a neutral line in the forthcoming elections.

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