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Heroes in business suits stand up to fight back against Mafia

Company bosses in Sicily are taking their lives in their hands to end the protection rackets



Richard Owen in Palermo

When Antonello Montante goes about his business as the head of an engineering firm in Sicily, two tough plainclothes police officers in jeans and sunglasses go with him – each with a chunky, black Beretta pistol tucked discreetly into his waistband.

Mr Montante's enemy is the Mafia, and his offence – in the eyes of the mob – is that he refuses to pay protection money, known as pizzo. He has been repeatedly threatened: bullets in the post, sinister telephone calls, severed rabbits' heads on the doorstep and petrol cans outside his factory at Caltanissetta as an unobtrusive warning of arson attacks.

The Mafia is not used to being disobeyed. Mr Montante, however, is one of many Sicilian businessmen who have had enough of pizzo. To the astonishment of mafiosi who have ruled by fear and intimidation for decades, businessmen are suddenly saying "No" – and living with the consequences.

"This is a revolution," Mr Montante said as we drove around Palermo, his bodyguards on the alert. "This is an historic moment. We have no choice but to finish what we have started. This is a cultural change no one can stop."

Mr Montante, 43, whose firm started out making bicycles two generations ago and now makes vehicle shock absorbers for customers including Virgin Trains in Britain, is a senior figure in Confindustria, the Italian CBI, which started the Sicilian revolution in September by announcing that in future any members who paid pizzo would be expelled. "The key to this is our age," Ivan Lo Bello, the head of Confindustria in Sicily, said when we met at the Confindustria offices by the docks in Palermo, near a huge roadside memorial to The Fallen in the Struggle Against the Mafia.

"It's a generational change. Most of us are in our forties. We've seen the world – I studied at Harvard and Berkeley, California. We live in an age of globalisation, and we simply do not see why we should collude with these parasites any more. This is not a cosmic fight against evil: we just want Sicily to be normal."

A balding man with a gentle smile, Mr Lo Bello, 44, looks an unlikely candidate to risk being another of the fallen in the struggle against the mob, let alone lead it. Like the others he has a family to worry about but he is determined to prove that the feared Mafia is not an untouchable monster. "We have a choice: we can continue to collude, or we can break free. Sicily does not have an unchangeable destiny. We can change it."

According to antiMafia police estimates mafiosi collect about €30 billion (£21 billion) a year in pizzo, not just in Sicily but in Calabria, Naples and the North, increasingly infiltrated by southern Mafia clans.

Typically a member of the local clan will casually approach a potential client for a chat, and indicate that a donation would be appreciated in return for "keeping things in order". Most shops and businesses comply. Shopkeepers can expect to pay up to €1,000 a month for protection, supermarket managers up to €5,000, factories considerably more. The result, Mr Lo Bello says, is a "state within a state". Its power has since become pervasive, infiltrating every corner of political and economic life. It overreached itself in 1992, however, killing two respected antiMafia judges, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, after whom Palermo airport is now named. This led to a crackdown, with the arrest of the Godfather, or "boss of bosses", Toto Riina, in 1993, and last year of his elusive successor, Bernardo Provenzano.

"Sicily has changed fundamentally over the past 10 or 15 years," Mr Lo Bello says. "The Mafia is not what it was. The fact that we have brought pizzo into the open is itself revolutionary."

Marco Venturi, 45, who runs a firm in Caltanissetta checking the quality of construction materials, said: "When I was growing up there was a conspiracy of silence: if you mentioned the Mafia, your parents would hush you and say, better not to talk about it. How ridiculous. There are five million Sicilians and only 6,000 or 7,000 are mafiosi."

You can forget The Sopranos or The Godfather, he says: "These are not glamorous people, they are just thugs."

Mr Venturi, who learnt English at summer schools in Taunton as a teenager, heads both the small business association and the chamber of commerce in Caltanissetta, where he and Mr Montante have staged an antiMafia takeover of the business community.

He has been under police escort since Christmas 2004, when he found a note pinned to the door reading "Dimeterti, bastardo" (Resign, you bastard). This was followed by the familiar threats, including rabbits' heads and bullets. He has never paid pizzo, but is being targeted for his stand.

Like Mr Montante and Mr Lo Bello he is haunted by youthful memories of the murder by the Mafia in 1991 of Libero Grassi, a businessman who refused to pay pizzo. "No one backed him," Mr Montante said. "But we are many. Extortionists are being named in court all over Sicily – in Gela, Catania, Agrigento, Palermo, Caltanissetta. The Mafia thinks this is a passing phase, but they are wrong."

The rebellion was sparked by Andrea Vecchio, a building contractor in Catania, who was the victim of four arson attacks in August after refusing to pay the mob 3 per cent of his turnover. Twenty of his lorries and excavators were set on fire. In September the new leadership of Confindustria in Sicily decided to back him. One of the extortionists was arrested last month and is awaiting trial: the other is on the run.

Shortly afterwards Giuseppe Catanzaro, 40, who runs a refuse treatment plant at Agrigento, went to the police and named 11 extortionists who had made him pay €75,000. This week all 11 were arrested and the local mayor and police chief are under investigation for suspected Mafia links.

Mr Catanzaro's premises were duly set on fire, and he, too, is under round-the-clock police protection. Later this month he and 14 other Agrigento businessmen are launching a CCTV surveillance and alarm system linked to the local police station.

He is dismissive of the fact that, as his own experience shows, local police and council officials are often in league with the mob. "Some are," he told me. "But again it's a generational thing: the antiMafia officer who helped us nail the 11 extortionists is 38, and utterly dedicated, even though the police lack resources – simple things like patrol cars. He doesn't see any more than I do why Sicily should be held to ransom by these nobodies. Not only do they not create wealth for Sicily, they destroy it."

What worries Mr Catanzaro and the others is that Italian law is often applied leniently: although it provides a seven-year sentence for extortion, rising to 12 if the accused forms part of a "Mafia association", prisoners are often let out early.

What happens if he puts an extortionist in jail and meets him on the street or in the local caf? a year or two later? "Then the Minister of the Interior answers to me for my safety and that of my family" he says, eyes blazing.

"It is the job of the State to provide security, not the Mafia".

Some Mafia experts warn that the mob has survived crackdowns in the past. The post1992 crackdown eventually lost momentum and the Mafia moved into more discreetly profitable areas than murder – drugs and money laundering, and public building projects. An estimated 80 per cent of businesses in Sicily pay pizzo.

Provenzano is behind bars, but his place has been taken by two new "Godfathers": Salvatore Lo Piccolo in Palermo, and Matteo Messina Denaro in Trapani, a town where the Mafia grip is so powerful that few extortionists have been ousted.

A recent report by Confesercenti, the Italian retailers association, estimated that the Mafia – including the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria and the Camorra in Naples as well as the Sicilian Cosa Nostra – still has a turnover of €90 billion a year, or 7 per cent of the Italian GDP, making it the country's "biggest company".

Nino Amadore, a Sicilian journalist and author of a book called La Zona Grigia (The Grey Area), cautions that "in any Sicilian town not only officials but also professionals collude with Mafia bosses – architects, doctors, accountants, lawyers". Nicolo Marino, the antiMafia prosecutor in Caltanissetta, says that collusion is "the norm, everyone pays". Links between Cosa Nostra and the American Mafia families such as the Gambinos have recently been reinforced.

In Palermo the President of the Sicilian region, Salvatore Cuffaro, is on trial for allegedly leaking information about police investigations to Cosa Nostra.

In Calabria the global reach of the 'Ndrangheta came to light in August with the massacre in the German town of Duisburg of six Calabrians as part of a feud for control of the lucrative cocaine trade. But the Sicilian businessmen's campaign is backed by a group of young idealists called Addiopizzo, and by Giulio Amato, the Interior Minister, who said: "Businesses in all of Sicily can rest assured that the State will show no mercy to the protection racket and support all those who rebel against pizzo."

Francesco Messineo, the Palermo antiMafia prosecutor, said: "It is time to expose the extortionists and end this once and for all. There is no going back." Vincenzo Conticello, who runs an historic bakery in Palermo – once patronised by Garibaldi – said that when the Mafia demanded €500 a month from him, he thought of his grandmother, who told him: "If you pay up you will always be a servant, never a free man."

Despite death threats he stood in court in Palermo last month and pointed the finger at the men he said had tried to make him pay up.

This week the Sicilian region gave Rodolfo Guajana, a paint and building materials supplier in Palermo, a new warehouse to replace the one burnt down in July because of his defiance of the Mafia. "I am not a symbol," he said at the handover ceremony. "I've just had enough of the Mafia. We all have."

Ettore Artioli, a Palermo businessman who is national deputy chairman of Confindustria, has suggested calling in the army to defeat Cosa Nostra. But he too believes that a "change of culture" is the only long-term answer. "It may take a generation or even two," he said, "but it will happen. I have two children, aged 9 and 11. What I hope is that when they, or their children, grow up and people talk about the Mafia, they will say: the Mafia? What was that?"

A history of violence

— The Mafia originated from a mutual protection society of small farmers against their feudal landlords in Sicily (the name derives from the Arabic mu'afah, meaning courage and protection).

— On 7 June, 1860, the Sicilian capital Palermo became an Italian city. The turbulent period of unification saw the Mafia's power increase immeasurably

— In the 1700s the British Royal Navy bought vast amounts of lemons to protect sailors from scurvy. As they became popular across Europe and America, the lemon orchards of Sicily grew in value and the Mafia's protection rackets became big business

— Sicily has historically been ruled by successive overseas powers - from the Greeks and Romans to the Arabs, Normans, French and now the Italian State. This has bred a mistrust of authority, with Sicilians instead relying on family ties and the mafia for protection and community

Sources: bestofsicily.com; www.historyofthefamafia.net

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