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One Hundred Defiant Shopkeepers Say "We Don't Pay Protection Money"

Anti-racketeering stickers on Palermo shop windows. Seven thousand shoppers use stickered outlets only

PALERMO – It is no coincidence that on the opening day of Bernardo Provenzano's trial more than one hundred shopkeepers have taken a cue from the young people of the "Addiopizzo" (Goodbye to Protection Money) website. Now their names, surnames and shops are online, saying no to the Mafia and its protection racket, as did Libero Grassi, the businessman who was murdered by Provenzano's Corleone clan for setting an example.

It is definitely no coincidence because yesterday afternoon, Libero Grassi's widow Pina was present in court as a co-plaintiff against the Mafia godfather arrested on 11 April. She had just attended a meeting of a group of youngsters wearing black T-shirts with the "Addiopizzo" logo, a broken circle with an X in the middle and the words "consumo critico" (critical consumption).

The good-humoured group is made up of men and women under thirty, except for a couple of May '68 veterans. Working in conjunction with Pina Grassi and her children Davide and Alice, "Addiopizzo" has already managed to convince seven thousand Palermo residents to drink their coffee and buy their pasta, shirts or books exclusively in the bars and shops that display the sticker, just as they might for a credit card or a loyalty card.

But this time there are no bonus points or cash. The aim of this anti-racketeering group, created two years ago when they plastered Palermo with stickers during the night, is summed up in a now-historic slogan, "An entire people that pays the 'pizzo' is a people without dignity".

Manfredi Lombardo, who runs the city-centre BlowUp pub where young Palermitans hang out, agrees with the movement. For Piero Onorato of the Broadway bookshop, signing up was an "unavoidable choice". That was also the case for the Di Bella family – father, mother and son – all of whom work in their newsstand in front of the central post office. Smiling Francesco Galante, one of the young people who attracts supporters, used to work for them. "You earn a living with dignity because customers aren't indirectly financing the Mafia".

It's a way of rewarding the first group of one hundred traders who collaborated with lawyers to draft a sort of protocol of honour. Yesterday evening, the number of "pizzo-free" outlets had risen to 120 as thousands of people continue to click on search engines to visit the www.addiopizzo.org site. Interest is growing in the run-up to the grand festival planned for Friday in Piazza Magione, when the traders will present themselves at an event with students, groups, comedians, actors and intellectuals.

The city, where magistrates reckon that 80% of shopkeepers pay the "pizzo", is abuzz with curiosity about these young people who rushed to the police headquarters to shout "Bastard, we are Sicily" at Bernardo Provenzano when he was captured. Everyone wonders who they are; everyone is reading the story of the flyposters who on 29 June two years ago forced the prefect to convene an emergency meeting of the committee for public order and security. Carabinieri, police and customs police officers went looking for the mysterious band that had covered the city-centre streets with hundreds of small stickers bearing the "An entire people..." message. Then came the discovery that it was

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the work of six or seven young idealists who had decided to change if not the world then at least a part of Palermo. Slowly, the group worked its way to success on two fronts. They found traders with the courage to say no and also consumers willing to support them by shopping at "pizzo-free" establishments.

In some cases, it was a dramatic step for shop owners still exposed to the racketeers' threats, as founder Barbara Giangrande realised, calling on journalists not to turn individual traders into symbols. "We don't need heroes or overexposure. We just want to live in a normal city".

She delivered her message to a formal meeting in the largest, loveliest hall at the university. In fact, the rector himself, Giuseppe Silvestri, extended the invitation, pleased at this breath of fresh air emerging from the austere walls of Palazzo Steri. The clock seems to have been turned back to 1968 or 1977 for the anti-racket youngsters have been joined by some of the people who experienced those earlier movements at first hand. One of them is Enrico Colajanni, the youngest son of Pompeo, a legendary wartime partisan. Enrico was raised on resistance. "The support of traders is like a precautionary formal complaint". Carlo Madonia agrees. A schoolteacher, he was pleased when one of his pupils, an eight-year-old girl in the fourth year at primary school, wrote in an essay, "I have realised that by shopping at the stores that don't pay the 'pizzo', you are not helping the Mafia and you are helping the ones that pay not to pay any more".

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