

THE END OF MOB RULE?

A massive crackdown on gangsters in New York has revealed the extent of the Mafia's penetration into the construction industry there. **Rod Sweet** reports



In 'Operation Old Bridge', 400 police officers arrested 60 suspected mobsters in one day

REUTERS

THE PRINCIPALS

Some of the senior Gambino figures involved in extorting New York construction firms



JOSEPH 'JO JO' COROZZO, SENIOR
(B. c. 1943)

The reputed 'consigliere' in the Gambino family, under the leadership of his brother and alleged boss, Nicholas 'Little Nick' Corozzo. In June this year he pleaded guilty to a racketeering conspiracy charge involving the extortion of a Staten Island cement company run by the 'mole', Joseph Vollaro. He was

sentenced to 46 months in prison. Corozzo was represented by his son, Joseph, Jr. a high-profile defence lawyer.



JOHN 'JACKIE THE NOSE' D'AMICO
(B. 1937)

Believed to share the running of the Gambino crime family with Nicholas Corozzo, and a close associate of the former boss, John Gotti (who died in prison in 2002),

John D'Amico was allegedly a veteran operator in the criminal underworld. In May he pleaded guilty to extorting a cement company out of \$100,000, and on August 18th he was sentenced to two years in prison.



NICHOLAS 'LITTLE NICK' COROZZO
(B. 1940)

A senior figure in the Gambino crime family, whose rise to

February 7th was a long day for police in New York City. It began with the cracking open of a 175-page indictment charging 62 people associated with the Gambino organised crime family and others with racketeering, extortion, murder and other federal offences.

Starting in the early morning, 400 federal, state and local police fanned out through the city and began banging on doors in what has been called the biggest Mafia crackdown in New York in 30 years.

By the time the day-long harvest of criminals had finished, the grip of 'La Cosa Nostra' on the construction industry in the New York City region had, authorities hoped, been loosened.

For years members of the Gambino family and others such as the Genovese and Bonanno families had been using fear and the threat of violence to extort money from trucking companies hauling debris from the region's construction sites, cement companies supplying those sites, and other contractors working on projects ranging from single homes to blocks of condominiums and even, on one occasion, a proposed auto-racing track.

"This investigation exposed the alleged grip that the Gambino organised-crime family has had over one of the largest construction markets in the United States," said Gordon S. Heddell, inspector general of the United States Labor Department, which took part in the investigation.

Heddell said the sweep, known as Operation Old Bridge, represented was a milestone toward eradicating a 'far-reaching and insidious conspiracy' involving construction companies owned, controlled or influenced by the Gambinos.

"Many of these construction companies allegedly paid a 'mob tax' in return for 'protection' and permission to operate," he said. "Through their alleged control of these companies, the Gambino organised crime family caused the theft of Teamsters union dues, and of health and pension funds, directly impacting the welfare and future of many workers."

THE MOLE

The arrests were the climax of a three-year investigation that relied on hundreds of hours of secret recordings made by an informant, Joseph Vollaro, a trucking firm owner closely linked with the top echelon of the Gambino organisation.

He was imprisoned in the mid-90s on drug dealing and loansharking charges and while in

prison he shared a cell with Nicholas Corozzo, a senior Gambino figure once marked out for leadership of the organisation. They became close and when released from prison, Vollaro started making payments to Corozzo. Vollaro's company, Andrews Trucking, became one of the city's leading construction haulage firms. Vollaro and the Gambinos soon came to dominate the construction business in Staten Island, one of New York's boroughs.

According to the *New York Times*, he became a 'mole' after he was arrested again in 2004 for possessing a large quantity of cocaine, and after that began recording conversations with Gambino bosses. It is believed these recordings prompted the FBI to expand the focus of the investigation from narcotics to the Gambinos' other interests, such as construction racketeering and even back in time to murders committed as early as 1976.

PREYING ON MAJOR PROJECTS

The scope of the Gambinos' reach is exemplified by their infiltration of a major construction project, a new racetrack which the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) wanted to build on Staten Island. The controversial project required 3.8 million cubic yards of fill to elevate the track bed, which would have cost the developer, International Speedway Corp. (ISC), a NASCAR sister company, around US\$20 million.

The Gambinos arranged for trucking firms they controlled to work at the site and would allegedly have collected a dollar per yard of fill placed. The project was eventually called off due to local opposition but had it gone ahead the criminals could have collected US\$3.8 million through the scheme.

Two construction managers at the NASCAR site were also involved in extortion. They were project manager Todd Polakoff, 30, and William Kilgannon, 49-year-old construction director, both working for the ISC subsidiary designing and building the racetrack.

Polakoff and Kilgannon were specifically indicted for extorting \$9,000 in early 2006 from an unnamed person working at the site with threats of force and violence.

Both Kilgannon and Polakoff left the ISC subsidiary in December that year for other employment. Kilgannon went on to become a senior project manager for a leading design-build firm, Haskell, headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida. According to the *Jacksonville Business*

Journal, he was in Oregon working on an office building project for Haskell when the FBI telephoned him. The newspaper reports that he then turned himself into authorities. In June, Kilgannon pleaded guilty to one count of extortion conspiracy. In August Todd Polakoff followed suit. Both were due to be sentenced as *iCON* was going to press in October.

A project manager and director of tunnel operations for the Schiavone Construction Company, which is involved in major civil engineering contracts for the city, was also charged but the charges were dropped in August for lack of evidence.

Not content with skimming millions off legitimate businesses through threats and extortion, the Gambino crime family preyed on workers as well. According to the indictment, senior Gambino figures stole directly from union benefit funds, and defrauded workers of rightful wages by under-reporting hours worked under union labour contracts. Two union-employed officials were also arrested.

STRIKING AT THE HEAD

To arrest 62 people at once was considered remarkable and unprecedented, and some raised questions about the effectiveness of bringing this number of people to trial at once. By mid-August 60 of the defendants had pleaded guilty, with many taking deals that will put them behind bars only for three years or less.

But others praised the police tactic. "In my view, this is groundbreaking," James Walden, a former federal prosecutor who won major convictions against the Bonanno crime family, told the Associated Press. "They essentially took out the entire organisation in one fell swoop."

He said it also had the potential to reap a new crop of cooperators, as Joseph Vollaro had been.

Once considered among the most powerful criminal organisations in the world, the Gambino organisation is believed now to be staggering from the blows struck against its leadership. However, even while police were celebrating victory in one battle against the Mafia, they admitted that the war was far from won. On the day Operation Old Bridge swung into action, FBI Deputy Director Pistole stated: "Today's arrests will be a major setback for the Gambino crime family, but it is a fallacy to suggest that La Cosa Nostra is no longer a threat to public safety. organised crime in New York is not dead." **iCON**



JOSEPH VOLLARO 'THE INFORMANT'
(B. 1966)

The man who secretly made hundreds of hours of recordings of conversations with senior Gambino figures. He was imprisoned in the mid-90s on drug dealing and loansharking charges. While in prison, he shared a cell with Nicholas Corozzo. They became close and when released from prison, Vollaro started making

payments to Corozzo. Vollaro's company, Andrews Trucking, became one of the city's leading construction truckers. It received a lucrative hauling contract for the NASCAR speedway planned for Staten Island. Vollaro and the Gambinos soon came to dominate the construction business in Staten Island. At one point, Vollaro owned three 40-foot yachts. In 2004, he was arrested with two kilograms of cocaine. Later he agreed to help the

FBI investigate the Gambinos. It is assumed he has entered a Witness Protection Program.



FRANK CALI
(B. 1965)

Reputed 'capo' of the Gambinos and their liaison to the Sicilian crime families, he was charged with extortion in connection with the Staten Island NASCAR race track and sentenced to two years in prison.