

# Remembering the Valiant Workers' Struggle of Mattancherry, Kochi

The historic workers' struggle of 1953 in Mattancherry, Kochi is a relatively less documented episode in the history of the working class movement in Kerala.

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15 September 2023 marks the seventieth anniversary of the police firing at Mattancherry in Kochi, Kerala against striking workers of the Cochin Port. The police atrocity was the culmination of a landmark struggle waged by the workers at the port – three workers were martyred in the firing and as a result of torture by the police.

In spite of the presence of a powerful communist movement in Kerala, academic studies on workers' struggles and labour history in general in the state are far from adequate. The Mattancherry workers' struggle is one such episode which had largely been forgotten.<sup>1</sup>



## ദേശഭിമാനി

1953 സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15 - പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

വെപ്റ്റയിൽ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം  
സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15  
കോച്ചിൻ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം  
പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

**ജീവിതനിലവാരം അങ്ങയററുമുയർത്താൻ**

സോവിയറ്റിൽ പുതിയ ഉല്പാദനമേഖലകൾ

സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15

കോച്ചിൻ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം

പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

**കോളനികളുടെ സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യം നേടിക്കൊടുക്കുക**

മെക്സിക്കോയിലെ സോവിയറ്റ് പ്രവാചകന്മാരുടെ സഹായം

സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15

കോച്ചിൻ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം

പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

**മട്ടാഞ്ചേരിയിൽ തൊഴിലാളികളുടെ നേരെ പോലീസ് വെടിവെച്ചു**

നേതാക്കളുടെ അറസ്റ്റിൽ പ്രതിഷേധിച്ചതിനെ തുടർച്ചയായി മരിച്ചവർക്കും ഒരാൾക്കും പരിശോധന

സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15

കോച്ചിൻ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം

പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

**വർദ്ധിച്ചുവന്നിരുന്ന മരണപ്രകടനം തൊഴിലാളികളുടെ പ്രതിഷേധം**

സെപ്റ്റംബർ 15

കോച്ചിൻ പ്രസിദ്ധപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന തുടക്കം

പുസ്തകം 2 രൂപയ്ക്ക് 230

Front page of *Deshabhimani* newspaper on 16 September 1953, with the headline (on the right) “Police fires at workers in Mattancherry; the shootout was for having protested against the arrest of [trade union] leaders; two dead, one injured”. (Courtesy: *Deshabhimani*.)

The basic issue that triggered the struggle sounds remarkably relevant even today – the dock workers of Mattancherry who were working at the Cochin Port were casual labourers, and they demanded regular jobs. The specific method that was used to choose them for work was an intensely degrading one. The method, which also existed in other parts of the world, was known as “calling-on” in London. A description of this process can be found in Henry Adolphus Mess’s book *Casual Labour at the Docks* (1916)<sup>2</sup>:

“The foreman stood on the raised ledge of a warehouse and eyed the crowd all over as if it were a herd of cattle. Then very deliberately he beckoned a man with his finger, and after a considerable interval a second and a third, until he had taken ten in all. There was an evident enjoyment of a sense of power, understandable enough as human nature goes, and the whole proceedings were horribly suggestive of the methods of a slave market. It is during the latter stages of a heavy call that disturbances are most frequent. The men begin to fidget and to push; those who are small and weak are shoved aside by the more burly, and sometimes a struggling mass of men may be seen elbowing and fighting to get to the front, and to attract the foreman’s attention... The foremen mount into booths, not unlike pulpits in appearance, and from them they distribute the metal tallies which are the token of engagement. The spectacle of some scores of men struggling violently is by no means infrequent here. Occasionally a foreman will toss a tally to a man at the rear of the crowd, just as a morsel of food might be thrown to a dog. Towards the close of the call all hands will be lifted in competition for the foreman’s attention, and stretched forward to secure the coveted tally... The men complain bitterly of these scrambles, in which clothes are torn, and kicks, scratches and even bites are received.”

A similar system was followed in the major ports in India as well.<sup>3</sup> In Cochin<sup>4</sup>, it came to be known in the name of *chaappa*, the Malayalam term for the metal token that was given to workers who were chosen for work on any given day. TM Abu, one of the leaders of the Mattancherry workers’ struggle, would later write in his book *Smrithipathangalil* [Down the Memory Lane] (1997)<sup>5</sup>:

“Something called chaappa was used to recruit labourers to work in ships at the port. Chaappa was a metal coin with the emblem of the concerned stevedore contractor engraved on it. The *mooppaan* [literally “elder” or “leader of a tribe”, but used to refer, in this case, to a kind of intermediary who supplied and/or supervised workers] appears at a point with these chappas in his hand, like a stack of silver rupees. When? When the whistling of the ships, like the burping of the sea, wakes up the shores of the sea and the lake. Everybody who is somewhat well-built would start running towards the point, and surround the mooppaan. “Mooppaa, dear mooppaa! One chaappa, please! Look, let Allah bear witness! Let Jesus bear witness! It’s been three days since we cooked rice at home!”

The mooppan wouldn't be moved by any of these entreaties. He would hand over the chaappa to those who bought him toddy and fish-head the previous night, or to those who are connected to him in some other way. He would hold the remaining stack of chaappas above his head and throw them around. The scramble to grab those chappas is beyond description.”



The workers at Cochin Port waged an epic struggle in 1953 for better working conditions.

“Workers were treated like slaves,” B Hamsa, who has been a trade unionist working among port workers in Kochi for more than half a century, says.<sup>6</sup> The Mattancherry workers’ struggle was the struggle of those who worked in ships to load and unload cargo. They were known as *batta tozhilaalikal*. They were workers who worked in the cargo holds of ships. They would be taken to the ships in *machuvvas* (small passenger boats), and they would load or unload cargo, onto or from the ships. Large cargo boats known as *tonis* were used to transport cargo to and from the ships, as the ships did not berth at the port, but at a distance from the port. It was a time when road transport was not well-developed. Much of the cargo such as food grain used to be transported in *tonis* and *kettuvallams*<sup>7</sup> to and from Kochi, the route extending to Munambam to the north, and to Kollam to the south.<sup>8</sup> Hamsa recalls that TK Pareekutty, who would go on to become a noted **film producer**, was the owner of a large number of *tonis*. Pareekutty was earlier a toni worker, and later rose to become a toni owner.

The modern port of Cochin was built in the 1920s by the British colonial rulers. A part of Cochin, known as British Cochin, was part of British India’s Madras Presidency, while

the surrounding regions were part of the princely state of Kochi. Workers from neighbouring villages, and migrant workers from various parts of Kerala and even other parts of the country formed the skilled labour force at the port. Most of these workers settled in Mattancherry and nearby backwater islands.<sup>9</sup> British Cochin and Mattancherry were neighbouring, twin town-centres, and Mattancherry bazaar emerged as a major commercial centre in the southwest coast of India by the 1940s.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Demand for Ending the Chaappa System and for Decasualisation**

The years from 1946 onwards saw an intense struggle in Cochin-Mattancherry demanding an end to the chappa system, end to the dominance of the contractors, and the decasualisation of port workers. These demands were raised under the leadership of the Cochin Port Cargo Labour Union (CPCLU), founded on 12 May 1946 and affiliated to the communist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The office-bearers were leaders of the Communist Party: George Chadayammuri was the union's president, TM Abu was elected secretary, P Gangadharan was vice-president, CX Antony was joint secretary, and Stalin Kunhumammad was treasurer.<sup>11</sup>

Similar struggles were taking place elsewhere too. The Bombay Dock Workers' Union led a strike of dock workers from 15 November 1947, demanding the abolition of the "*tolliwalla* system" (tolliwallas were the contractors who were called upon to supply the necessary amount of labour), and demanding the direct employment of workers. The very same month, the government introduced a bill to regulate the employment of dock workers.<sup>12</sup>

The bill was passed as the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act, 1948.<sup>13</sup> The legislation empowered the central government to devise a scheme "for the registration of dock workers and employers with a view to ensuring greater regularity of employment and for regulating the employment of dock workers whether registered or not in a Port". This meant that port labour would be "decasualised" and the terms and conditions of their employment, including rates of remuneration, hours of work, conditions as to holidays, etc. would be regulated. The scheme would "prohibit, restrict, or otherwise control the employment of dock workers to whom the scheme does not apply and the employment of dock workers by employers to whom the scheme does not apply." Inspectors would be deployed to ensure that the provisions of the scheme are complied with. In order to administer the scheme for any port, a Dock Labour Board would be established with equal number of members representing the government, the dock workers, and the employers of dock workers and shipping companies.

While the scheme envisaged by the legislation was implemented in other major ports such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, the old, barbaric system continued to operate in Cochin port. Workers' resentment continued to fester.

To begin with, the CPCLU gave letters to the stevedores (the agents of ships that came to the port with cargo) in the port, demanding that the central legislation should be implemented in Cochin. Workers would then have to be muster-rolled and paid wages stipulated by the central government. The Dock Labour Board would replace the intermediaries (who were called *mooppans* or *tandelans*). Decent wages and working conditions would be a reality for dock workers, as the intense exploitation by intermediaries would end. These intermediaries used to take a big share of the wages that companies used to give them to pay to the workers. Such practices would also end with the formation of the DLB.



**B Hamsa, former General Secretary of the Cochin Port Labour Union**

As union activities intensified, it became more difficult for the employers to continue the unbridled exploitation of dock workers. The book *Adayaalam* (2020)<sup>14</sup> by Abdulla Mattanchery on the Mattancherry workers' struggle describes the tactic used by the employers to divide the workers – they claimed that communists are god-deniers, and that it was sinful to associate with such people. This tactic did have some impact on workers. It was in this context that another union was formed, in December 1948, by those who were opposed to communists – the Cochin Thuramukha Thozhilaali Union (Cochin Port Workers' Union, CTTU). It was Congress leaders who led the effort to form this union.

The CTTU demanded that the contract system be ended, and that the responsibility to allot work to workers should rest with the union. The demands for decasualisation and formation of DLB were not of importance to the CTTU.

Soon the situation became increasingly difficult for the CPCLU. The Communist Party was banned in 1948, and consequently, there was a crackdown on communist-led trade unions as well – the major unions affiliated to the AITUC were banned.<sup>15</sup> Offices of AITUC-affiliated unions were encroached upon by the police, their records were destroyed, and many of their activists were arrested.<sup>16</sup> The CPCLU was banned on 1 January 1950, and its leaders went underground due to the repression. Given the adverse situation, CPCLU leaders advised union members to join CTTU, which had been registered as an independent union.

The influx of communist and communist-leaning workers strengthened the CTTU and the resistance it led, infuriating the employers. More workers in CTTU also now demanded decasualisation. But then the employers adopted a new tactic. They proposed to give the chaappas to the union, which could then distribute the chaappas to the workers. The CTTU accepted this proposal in 1951. Now the workers began queueing up in front of the union office to collect chaappas.

The ban on the Communist Party was withdrawn in 1952, and as leaders who were imprisoned or gone underground returned, the CPCLU became active again. The demand for decasualisation was resurrected. CPCLU began an agitation demanding that workers in Kochi be paid the same wages as workers in other major ports.<sup>17</sup> Workers who had joined CTTU began to return to CPCLU, which worried the CTTU leadership. The CTTU changed the colour of its flag from tricolour to red in response to the communists' argument that workers' flag is red in colour and that workers should organise under the Red Flag.<sup>18</sup> CTTU's adoption of red flag annoyed GS Dara Singh, a Congress leader. He demanded a return to tricolour, but that demand went unheeded. He then got some Congressmen together to form the Cochin Port Thozhilaali Union [Cochin Port Workers' Union] (CPTU), founded on 31 January 1953 and affiliated to the Congress-led Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). The CPTU was inaugurated by Abid Ali Jaferbhai, the Union Deputy Minister for Labour, on 31 January 1953.<sup>19</sup>

Dara Singh began bargaining with stevedores, pointing out to them his connections with the central government. Thus the stevedores agreed to give CPTU a share of the chaappas. CPTU also remained silent about decasualisation.

Faced with a setback, the CTTU opposed the sharing of chaappas with the CPTU, and sought the help of the CPCLU. The CPCLU made support conditional on CTTU's support to the demand for decasualisation.<sup>20</sup> Thus the two unions came to an agreement, leading to many workers leaving CPTU to come to the CPCLU-CTTU fold.

In the end, Dara Singh was forced to join the other two unions in demanding decasualisation, and a joint action committee of the three unions was formed.<sup>21</sup> This committee gave notice for a strike demanding decasualisation and the formation of the Dock Labour Board. As the employers refused to respond, workers began strike on 1 July 1953.

Though the strike began in connection with cargo-handling work in ships, the agitation drew in the support of many other sections of workers and their unions – such as the boat workers' union, the headload workers' union, small traders, beedi makers, coir workers, fish workers, rickshaw workers, etc.<sup>22</sup>

As the strike dragged on, hunger stalked workers' homes. The committee leaders put pressure on the government, but the port administrator sided with the employers. Some of the employers were funding agents of the Congress.<sup>23</sup> Therefore the Congress government of Travancore-Cochin<sup>24</sup> was reluctant to force a pro-worker settlement.

Employers put pressure on Congress trade union leaders to end the strike, but the latter were afraid to withdraw from the strike, fearing the further growth of communists. The Congress leaders calculated that when workers grow tired due to hunger, they would withdraw from the strike.<sup>25</sup>

But the striking workers remained defiant. A strike support committee was formed to aid starving families, and aid began reaching the committee from different parts of Kerala. Thus it became certain that the strike couldn't be defeated easily. The committee also campaigned on the importance of the strike at traffic junctions.

The stevedores and steamer agencies were determined to crush the agitation, and they enlisted the support of the Congress government of Thiru-Kochi.<sup>26</sup> Congress leader AJ John was the chief minister, and TM Varghese was the Home Minister.



The martyrs' column at Mattancherry, commemorating CX Antony, Saithali, and Said.

## Fighting at the Barricades<sup>27</sup>

On 14 September 1953, the 74<sup>th</sup> day of the strike, the cargo ship SS Sagar Veena belonging to the steamer agent Africana reached the Cochin port. The stevedore of the ship was a Gujarati, Bhanji Jevat Khona (BJ Khona).<sup>28</sup> The right to give chaappa for the work in that ship was given to INTUC. That was part of the tactics of the employers and the government to divide the workers.

In response, the workers decided to blockade the office of the stevedore (BJ Khona) at the bazaar. The strike site was moved to the front of the company. The situation turned explosive. Large numbers of police and Malabar Special Police (MSP) personnel had already been assembled in the area.<sup>29</sup> The MSP, a paramilitary unit, had become notorious from the time of India's freedom struggle for its atrocities against freedom fighters and communists. R Prakasam says: "Many trade union activists in Malabar had been shot dead by MSP during 1948-51. Many others were taken to camps and tortured to death."<sup>30</sup>

The port administrator MS Venkitaraman called union leaders for negotiation. MK Raghavan, AA Kochunni, KH Sulaiman (all three from CTTU), GS Dara Singh (CPTU), and TM Abu (CPCLU) took part in the negotiations.<sup>31</sup> Both sides reiterated their already-stated positions, with the employers stating that the chaappa could be given to the union to distribute to workers.

At this stage, Dara Singh announced that he is withdrawing from the strike, deciding not to waste the chance to hog the whole chaappa.<sup>32</sup> As the negotiations dragged on till midnight, the port administrator took CTTU leaders aside and talked to them. He told them that there were directions from the Congress's national leaders, and requested them to withdraw from the strike. Lakhs of rupees of goods are lying idle in godowns, and people are suffering as grains were not being transported. He asked them to take into consideration the "nation's interests". He then put forward another proposal – the chaappas would be divided among the CTTU and the INTUC. The government will "take care" of those who still continue the strike. There is no other way, he said as an ultimatum.<sup>33</sup>

CTTU leaders came to the assessment that there's no hope left to achieve success by moving forward with the strike, which had already passed 74 days without resolution. Gaining control of work and workers by getting the right to allot chaappas would not be a bad outcome, they thought. So they also decided to withdraw from the strike.<sup>34</sup>

As the CTTU announced the decision at the negotiation, TM Abu exploded. This is deceit, it cannot be accepted, he said. Abu leaned out of the window and told the workers waiting below, "Comrades, they betrayed us. They decided to share the chaappas. Our demand has not been accepted. We will continue the strike, even if we fall down and die here."<sup>35</sup> The workers were shocked and deeply disappointed.

When the leaders came down after negotiations, workers shouted slogans against them. We won't withdraw from the strike, the leaders can leave, the workers said. They raised slogans and moved towards BJ Khona's office.

CTTU leaders MK Raghavan and AA Kochunni went to the CTTU office, but before they could sleep, workers surrounded the office and raised slogans against the leaders.<sup>36</sup> As dawn came, more workers who had gone home the previous day also came to the office.

The workers dragged Raghavan and Kochunni out of the office. They were given Red Flags to hold. The workers marched to the stevedore's office, with Kochunni and Raghavan walking in front repeating the slogans raised by the workers.<sup>37</sup>

The workers' march blockaded the BJ Khona office. The central labour officer came to the spot and called union leaders for negotiations at the BJ Khona office. The workers did not trust Raghavan and Kochunni<sup>38</sup>, and made it clear that they would not accept any

negotiation without TM Abu, who had gone to sleep at the party office.

Union activists went to call Abu, who then went to the BJ Khona office.

The police were waiting for Abu. As soon as he arrived, he was arrested and pushed into the police van. Workers were furious, and stopped the van. As they realised that workers wouldn't spare them if Abu was taken without them, Raghavan, Kochunni, and Dara Singh entered the police van and secured themselves.<sup>39</sup>

But the workers refused to allow the van to move, and the police began lathi-charging the workers. In defence, the workers started throwing stones at the police. The police and armed forces then fired at the workers. The workers, however, did not disperse. They put up barricades by overturning carts used to transport cargo, and continued to throw stones. Two workers were martyred in the firing. Twenty-two-year-old Said, a *machuva* [a small passenger boat] worker, and who hailed from Chavakkad, was the first one to be killed. Twenty-three-year-old Saithali, a *toni* [a kind of boat used to transport cargo] worker and a native of Thuruthi in Fort Kochi, was the second. Many of those injured were taken to the hospital in carts.

There was one more martyr in the struggle – 21-year-old CX Antony, a winch worker, joint secretary of the CPCLU and a native of Fort Kochi. When Antony learned that TM Abu, the union's secretary, had been taken into custody by the police, he ran to the police station to meet Abu. But when Antony reached the police station, he was also taken into custody and brutally tortured. He was released so that it wouldn't appear that he had died in police custody. He returned home extremely exhausted and physically shattered. The family was too poor to seek expert medical care, while neighbours were too afraid to provide adequate aid. Already in dire straits, Antony soon also contracted small pox, and died at home.<sup>40</sup> Three years after his death, his mother Cicily died due to starvation.<sup>41</sup>

Many others remained as living martyrs due to the injuries sustained during the firing and the subsequent police witch-hunt. Many were taken into police custody and tortured. About 100 people were made accused in the case. The police made everybody who sought medical care at the Fort Hospital at Fort Kochi accused. Many people avoided going to hospital, afraid that they would also be made accused. Many workers from Malabar and Travancore took the first train available and left.<sup>42</sup>

Among the main accused were the office-bearers of CPCLU (AITUC). TM Abu was brutally tortured by the police.



The TM Aboo Road and the old Post Office at Mattancherry. Saithali was shot dead near this post office.



The old Post Office at Mattancherry. There were bullet marks on the walls of the post office as well.

CPCLU continued the agitation demanding decasualisation and formation of the Dock Labour Board. Abdulla Mattanchery says that as Congress leaders were exposed as having betrayed the struggle, CTTU was also forced to demand decasualisation, although they were not ready to go on an agitation. They merely wanted to prevent the further exodus of workers from the organisation.<sup>43</sup>

After the firing, the CTTU went on a campaign asking, “Did the police fire, or were they forced to fire?”, insinuating that the communist trade unionists, rather than the police and the MSP, were responsible for the atrocity.<sup>44</sup> MK Raghavan, AA Kochunni, and GS Dara Singh testified in court against the workers, as prosecution witnesses (approvers).<sup>45</sup> The special court sentenced three of the accused for two years imprisonment each. But all were acquitted on appeal at the sessions court.<sup>46</sup> A large chunk of the proceeds from the performance of the Kerala People’s Arts Club’s<sup>47</sup> famous play ‘Ningalenne Communistaakki’ (You Made Me a Communist) was used to meet the legal expenses of the case. The workers of Mattancherry received solidarity from across the world. The World Federation of Trade Unions condemned the police firing, and working class organisations in France, Germany, Spain held demonstrations in solidarity with the

workers of Mattancherry.<sup>48</sup>

After nine years of struggle, the workers won their demand, with the coming into being of the Cochin Dock Labour Board on 5 November 1962. About 12,000 workers registered themselves with the DLB. Stevedores would inform the board of the required number of workers, and the board would allot workers on the basis of priority list. Workers began to be paid decent wages. Later when the DLB was made part of Cochin Port, it came to be known as Board Labour Division.

DLB was entrusted with the responsibility of thousands of workers who handled the cargo at the port. Its tasks were to make workers available as per requirement, stipulate work, and ensure the safety and welfare of workers. DLB would determine the wage and working conditions of the workers from the time when they are recruited till retirement. The Board was supposed to ensure 21 working days per month for every worker. If that could not be ensured, the worker was to be paid minimum wages for every day for which work (up to the minimum guaranteed days of work per month) could not be provided. The Board made a number of benefits available to the workers, including housing loan, medical care, educational benefits, cooperative society canteen, provisional store, recreational facilities, family welfare scheme, death benefit scheme, special ex gratia for serious diseases, and other financial aid.<sup>49</sup>

The Mattancherry workers' struggle to win regulated working time, wages, and benefits was thus successful.

The spirit of the struggle was most famously captured by the renowned theatre activist and actor PJ Antony,<sup>50</sup> in the form of a *padappaattu* [literally “war song”, historically a kind of poem in Arabi Malayalam literature]<sup>51</sup>:

*“Kaattaalanmaar naadu bharichee  
Naattil teemazha peytappol  
Pattaalatte pullaayi karutiya  
Mattaancherry marakkaamo?”*

[When savages ruled the land  
And fire rained upon the country,  
Here, armed forces were treated with contempt:  
Can Mattancherry be forgotten?]

## The Aftermath

After the chaappa system was discontinued and the Dock Labour Board was formed, workers who handled cargo in ships came under the Board. But various kinds of jobs (such as stacking, loading, unloading, blending of tea, coffee, etc., and packing) at warehouses at the port were not under the Board. The exploitation of casual workers who were engaged

in such jobs continued in a different form as a section of union leaders<sup>52</sup> took charge of the labour contract for large companies. These intermediaries took a substantial cut of the wages that should have gone to the workers. Those who opposed such exploitation – such as Santo Gopalan, a leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] – were violently dealt with<sup>53</sup>. This system was finally ended in 2008, when PK Gurudasan was the Labour Minister in the Left Democratic Front government of 2006-2011 led by Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan. This was made possible by bringing the workers under the purview of the Kerala Headload Workers Welfare Board.

The unions which were part of the historic strike of 1953 continued to exist. The 1964 split in the Communist Party, however, weakened CPCLU. Another union, the Cochin Port Labour Union – which was originally formed by some leaders of the Kerala Congress<sup>54</sup> – eventually came to be dominated by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), associated with the CPI(M). MM Lawrence was elected as its first General Secretary, and V Viswanatha Menon became the first President. CPLU organises labourers working at warehouses, shipping companies, at the offices of stevedores and steamer agents, etc. Within the Cochin Port proper, another union affiliated to the CITU – the Cochin Port Employees Organisation – is active. The Cochin Port Staff Association, associated with the Congress, is another union that is active in the port. The CTTU, affiliated to the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), continues to be a major presence among port workers. The CPTU has weakened substantially.

The advent of containerisation has been a major setback to workers at the Cochin Port. The use of containers significantly reduced the need for workers at ports across the globe, and the same trend affected the Cochin Port as well. This transformation accelerated with the construction of the International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) at the island of Vallarpadam to the north of the existing Cochin Port. With the shift of most of the business of the port to the ICTT (built, developed, and operated by the global terminal operator Dubai Ports World), a large number of jobs disappeared. This led to the economic decline of Mattancherry, where workers used to live and where large numbers of warehouses and trading houses used to operate.<sup>55</sup>



The Mattancherry bazaar.

Many of the workers who used to be registered with the DLB were forced to take “voluntary retirement”. More casual labourers were employed in their place. Union activities are practically non-existent at ICTT.<sup>56</sup> This, and the massive reduction in the number of workers at the port, have led to the weakening of trade unions at the port.

The ICTT was constructed with the claims that it will provide a huge boost to the business of the port, leading to much higher economic growth for the entire region and the state of Kerala. Such hopes have been belied<sup>57</sup>, union leaders testify. The terminal today handles only a fraction of the number of containers it was expected to handle. In brief, the much-trumpeted growth in trade at the port has not occurred, while jobs have disappeared.

Prolonged and determined struggles by the organised working class managed to win the demand for decent work at the port, and the workers managed to retain this success for a few decades. But the headwinds of neoliberal globalisation have posed unprecedented challenges, making the path ahead for the port workers of Kochi a very uncertain one.

(All photographs, except the Deshabhimani archive image, are by the author.)

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## Endnotes

1 Earlier this year, the release of the Malayalam film *Thuramukham*, directed by Rajeev Ravi, brought the Mattancherry workers' struggle to the spotlight.

2 HA Mess (1916), *Casual Labour at the Docks*, G Bell & Sons, Ltd., London.

3 Shubhankita Ojha (2014), "Regulating Work: Decasualisation of Dock Labour in Colonial India", *Social Scientist*, March-April.

4 Cochin is another name for Kochi; Cochin became the official name during colonial times; Kochi became the official name from 1996 onwards. The port in Kochi is governed by the Cochin Port Authority.

5 TM Abu, *Smrithipathangalil* [Down the Memory Lane] (1997), Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.

6 Personal Interview with B Hamsa, 15 May 2023, Chullickal, Kochi. B Hamsa was the General Secretary of the Cochin Port Labour Union (CPLU) from 1994 to 2022, and as of May 2023, is serving as the Vice-President of the union.

7 A kettuvallam is a houseboat, with thatched roof covers over wooden hulls. They were traditionally used to transport cargo, but these days they are used mostly to take tourists around backwaters in Kerala.

8 Interview with B Hamsa (2023).

9 Justin Mathew (2015), "Port Building and Urban Modernity, Cochin, 1920-45", in Satheese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varghese (eds.), *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad.

10 Ibid.

11 George Chadayammuri and P Gangadharan were active in the trade union movement

in the Cochin Port from the 1930s onwards, when trade union activities at the port picked up as a result of the enthusiastic work of Congress Socialist Party activists, says R Prakasam in his 1979 book *Keralathile Trade Union Prasthaanathinte Charithram* [The History of the Trade Union Movement in Kerala], published by Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.

12 Ernesto Noronha (2001), “Bombay Dock Labour Board 1948-1994: From Insecurity to Security to Insecurity?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 29.

13 [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\\_lang=en&p\\_isn=51953](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=51953), accessed on 8 May 2023.

14 Abdulla Mattanchery (2020), *Adayaalam* [The Sign], Pranatha Books, Kochi.

15 *Deshabbimani* (2023), “Annu Kochi Thuramukham Chorayil Mungi; Pakshe Thozhilaalikal Keezhadangiyilla” [That Day, Cochin Port Was Drenched in Blood; But the Workers Did Not Surrender], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MLgXKzHUPE>, accessed on 7 May 2023.

16 R Prakasam (1979), *Keralathile Trade Union Prasthaanathinte Charithram* [The History of the Trade Union Movement in Kerala], Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.

17 Mattanchery (2020).

18 Ibid.

19 Prakasam (1979).

20 Mattanchery (2020).

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 The state of Kerala had not been formed yet. After India won independence in 1947, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin merged in 1949 to form the Travancore-Cochin (Thiru-Kochi) state. Travancore-Cochin and the Malabar district were merged in 1956 to form the state of Kerala based on the common language Malayalam.

25 Mattanchery (2020).

26 John Fernandes (2013), “Mattancherry Marakkaamo” [Can Mattancherry Be Forgotten?], *Deshabhimani*, September 15. <https://www.deshabhimani.com/articles/general-news/352450>, accessed on 7 May 2023.

27 This section, on the incidents of 14 and 15 September 1953, draws heavily on the description provided in Abdulla Mattanchery’s book *Adayaalam* (2020).

28 Mattanchery (2020).

29 *Deshabhimani* (2023).

30 Prakasam (1979).

31 Mattanchery (2023).

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Interview with B Hamsa (2023).

39 *Deshabhimani* (2023).

40 *Deshabhimani* (2023) and Interview with B Hamsa (2023).

41 Mattanchery (2020).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Interview with B Hamsa (2023), and Interview with KJ Antony, former Opposition Leader of the Municipal Corporation of Kochi, 16 May 2023, Ernakulam.

45 Interview with B Hamsa (2023).

46 Ibid.

47 KPAC, associated with the Communist Party.

48 Mattanchery (2020).

49 Ibid.

50 PJ Antony was a distinguished theatre activist, playwright, actor and director who worked with the KPAC. He also wrote a play titled *Party Card*, based on the last days of CX Antony who was martyred after being tortured by the police during the Mattancherry struggle. PJ Antony would later win a National Film Award for Best Actor in 1974 for his performance in the film *Nirmaalyam*.

51 Baiju Chandran (2023), "Pattaalatte pullaayikkarutiya Mattancherriyum PJ Antonyyude 'Party Cardum' [The Mattancherry That Treated the Armed Forces With Contempt and PJ Antony's 'Party Card']", *Deshabhimani*, <https://www.deshabhimani.com/special/p-j-antony-memory-of-mattanchery-martyrs-baiju-chandran/1079630>, March 14. accessed on 7 May 2023.

52 These were leaders of the CTTU, according to B Hamsa.

53 Interview with KJ Antony (2023).

54 Kerala Congress – a regional party which is not to be confused with the Kerala unit of the Indian National Congress.

55 Interview with KJ Antony (2023). Antony mentions the song ‘Kaayalinarike, Kochikkaayalinarike kodikal paratti kuthichu pongiya kampanikal’ [The companies which grew up, their flags fluttering, near the Kochi Lake] (written by Meppally Balan, a Cochin Port employee, and composed and sung by the renowned musician H Mehboob) which talks about the many trading companies that used to be active in Kochi. While Mehboob passed away in 1981, the song was resurrected three decades later in the 2013 Malayalam film ‘Annayum Rasoolum’ [Anna and Rasool]: <https://youtu.be/fz0lrFSZK9I>. Shahabaz Aman, who sang ‘Kaayalinarike’ for the film, describes the song as a working class blues song.

56 Interview with B Hamsa (2023); and Neethi P (2016), *Globalization Lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective*, Oxford University Press: “... the drive for voluntary retirement was given a push after the arrival of DPW [Dubai Ports World] in 2005... DPW was engaging in a practice of dismissing any of their private, non-permanent workers who joined a union.”

57 Anto T Joseph (2021), “How India’s First Container Hub Terminal Failed,” *Fortune India*, March 12, <https://www.fortuneindia.com/enterprise/how-indias-first-container-hub-terminal-failed/105292>. Accessed on 30 May 2023.