When I was studying Social Work at Sydney University we had an American text on social theory, which in its introduction stated authoritatively that there are no historical laws determining social development. Having thus dismissed marxism in one or two sentences it went on for chapter after interminable chapter interpreting all human societies in terms of 1960s American liberal pluralism.

Richard Kennedy’s collection of essays, which is designed for use in university social work courses, is a far cry from the conservative humbug which passed as education material for social workers less than a decade ago. Taking as their basis a socialist critique of welfare, the eleven contributors develop progressive explanations of a number of aspects of the present Australian welfare state.

Social work departments at Australian universities have been the scene of many struggles between students and staff, as the students’ desire for relevant education ran into the deep-seated conservatism and elitism of the social work profession. Many of the chapters in this book, by people from a variety of professional backgrounds, contain trenchant criticisms of the theory and practice of traditional social work. Winton Higgins, in an excellent chapter analysing the capitalist welfare state, describes traditional social work. Winton Higgins, in an excellent chapter analysing the capitalist welfare state, describes traditional social work theory thus:

...it tends to be a hodgepodge of techniques and ‘sciences’ the elements of which suffer from the usual failings of bourgeois disciplines, compartmentalisation of knowledge and failure to make theoretical underpinnings let alone class biases.

With such a weak and essentially useless theoretical basis many well-meaning social workers are cast into situations where the human aspects of capitalist exploitation and alienation are most acute and their training and preparation provide them with no answers to the anger and resentment they encounter from their clients.

The greatest flaw in this book is that it provides no real insights into what the welfare worker can do in practice when faced with the victims of an inhuman and crumbling social system. None of the contributors are practising social workers and therein lies the failure of most professional welfare education — it is prepared and presented, in the main, by people who have very little knowledge of what life is actually like out there in the working agencies of the welfare state.

But despite this there is a great deal in these contributions for practising social workers and indeed for all those interested in how "welfare" has developed as a central lever of social control in contemporary capitalism.

Elizabeth Windschuttle and Judith Godden in separate chapters examine the role of women in the philanthropic associations of nineteenth century Australia. The growing understanding of how welfare work has been cast ideologically as ‘women’s work’ is very important to socialist welfare workers today in fighting against reactionary moves to cut welfare services by putting the burden back onto women who are presented as ‘natural’ voluntary carers.

A number of chapters deal with the role of the ALP in the development of state welfare policies. A contribution by Drew Cottle analysing the role of the ALP in the labor movement from 1941 to 1945 is extremely insightful in 1983 when another labor government speaks of national reconciliation and reconstruction while the burden of capitalist economic crisis is carried by the working class.

Les Louis looks in detail at the failure of trade unions in Victoria to fight for the unemployed in the 1930s. He details the systematic sell-out of the unemployed to the then Labor government by reformist union leaders. Once again many past scenarios seem chillingly familiar.

Unfortunately none of the contributors mention the most significant development in Australian welfare over the last decade — the organisation of welfare workers into a trade union. In New South Wales this union is playing an active role in the labor movement where it raises questions of welfare in a positive manner, and in the welfare agencies where members of the union are put in touch with the labor movement. The organisation of welfare workers into a trade union reflects the development of class struggle in the welfare field and the increasing importance of welfare spending and provision in the broad struggle between labour and capital.

This book provides good theoretical background for those who are engaged in this struggle. It is a valuable resource for all socialists who want to understand the dynamics of welfare in a monopoly capitalist state.

Brian McGahen is a social worker and an officer of the Social Welfare Workers’ Union.