

reveals there is no bi-partisan commitment to ensuring that there is equity of access to accommodation. In short, it is a story of policy failure' (p. 284).

This is a book that throws down the gauntlet to nation's political leaders, especially in the ALP, to try to recapture the practical commitment to public housing and the 'good city'. It provides a firm foundation for doing so by carefully documenting what has previously gone wrong and why. It is not always easy reading, because of the many twists and turns in the historical experience that the author documents, but it will surely stand the test of time as the definitive historical study of this important but perpetually frustrating field of public policy.

Patrick O'Leary and Peter Sheldon

Employer Power and Weakness: How Local and Global Factors Have Shaped Australia's Meat Industry and its Industrial Relations

Victorian Universities Regional Research Network Press,
Ballarat, 2012, pp. 222, \$29.95

Reviewed by Frank Stilwell

Processing fresh meat took an industrial character following the development of effective freezing technology in the 1860s. However, only since the Second World War has the Australian meat processing industry been a major exporting sector. Since then, global factors shaping demand and investment have interacted with local factors, such as the seasonal nature of livestock production, the geographical isolation of many of the regional processing centres, and local labour shortages. Working in abattoirs, producing and distributing fresh meat, is not everyone's first choice of employment; and there is a substantial proportion of itinerants in the workforce. Industrial relations considerations have frequently loomed large in the industry.

This monograph – originating as a PhD thesis written by the first-named author and supervised by the second – focuses particularly on how employers have sought to organise themselves in order to ensure their

profitability. The workers in the industry are effectively all covered by a single union – the Australian Meat Industry Employees' Union (AMIEU) – creating unity in circumstances where an otherwise dispersed and segmented workforce would lack the capacity for collective action. The employers have become increasingly well organised too, especially since the formation in 1986 of Australian Meat Holdings (AMH).

O'Leary and Sheldon explore three broad themes: 'what strategic choices have meat industry employers made in relation to industrial conflict?; why did they make these choices?; and how have these choices shaped industrial relations in the Australian meat industry?' (p. 5). Their methods of inquiry are historical and descriptive, including a couple of major case-studies – of R.J. Gilbertson's business (SBA Foods) in Victoria and of the South Burnett Meat Works Cooperative Association in Queensland. In trying to determine what shapes employers' power (or weakness), the authors seek to integrate company-based, organisational and institutional perspectives, putting particular emphasis on how employers' strategic choices affect their perceived legitimacy and industrial relations outcomes.

The historical approach taken in the book yields much rich detail. Stopping the story in the year 2001, however, limits the value of the work as a basis for considering current strategies and prospects in the industry. It also means that some of the political tensions that have been evident in recent years – such as concerns about the export of livestock for overseas rather than domestic processing – cannot get consideration. Also falling outside the timeframe of the book is the experience of having temporary Afghan refugees working in regional abattoirs (such as those in Young, NSW and Albany, WA), a situation that highlighted the awkward tension between the nation's restrictive refugee policy and the labour requirements of this rural industry during the last decade. Of course, time limits always have to be set in historical research. In this case, it is also a reminder that the book does not set out to provide an overall political economic analysis of the meat-processing industry: rather, reflecting its origins as a university thesis, it has a tighter focus on how employer power shaped industrial relations as the twentieth century progressed.