Today's depression marks, not one, but two, crises. It marks a crisis for capitalism. It also marks a crisis for the socialist movement. Both marxist theory and our historical experience tell us that a time of economic depression is a time for socialist advance. Yet, for most people, socialist alternatives are not even on the political agenda, and socialist forces seem divided and ineffective. So what is the way forward? Should socialists join the Labor Party, the Communist Party, or one of the smaller groups which claim to be revolutionary?

There is clearly a need to reassess the various strategies which are proposed by those who claim the title "socialist". Socialist Strategies seeks to do just that. Placing each in the context of depression-bound Britain, a number of different strategies are evaluated. The book consists of a collection of articles by different authors which examine, in turn, the British Labour Party, the Communist Party of Great Britain, revolutionary socialism, feminism, and, finally, community politics and the peace movement. In their conclusion, David Coates and Robert Looker bring down a verdict in favour of revolutionary socialism.

Unfortunately, however, the article by David Bailley which is written in the name of "revolutionary socialism" is probably the worst article in the whole book. The crude and oversimplified premises which form the thrust of the article do a grave injustice to the full complexity of revolutionary politics. For example, great significance is placed on treacherous socialist leaders and their acts of betrayal. This can become obsessive at the best of times, but at times when there are scarcely any “followers” to betray this sort of emphasis on leadership betrayal becomes patently ridiculous.

Bailley’s main mistake, however, is to confuse socialist advances with social upheaval. While it is true that social upheaval can be an important prerequisite for revolution, it is equally obvious that upheaval can lead in a number of quite different directions - not least barbarism and even nuclear annihilation.
Furthermore, this confusion has the effect of allowing Bailley to avoid altogether the questions posed by the crisis in socialism by simply postponing them. Thus, he writes that future attempts to build a socialist society will be made when the next calamity breaks (my emphasis). Ultimately, Bailley allows revolutionary politics to collapse into a kind of faith. In this vein, he concludes that "whatever the shortcomings of the Far Left, their small forces remain the custodians of a culture whose time must surely return" (my emphasis). The trouble is that no matter how "sure" Bailley is of a socialist second coming, the fact remains that we are in the middle of a "calamity" right now and we are having great difficulty in mobilising support for socialist solutions.

Coates and Looker also conclude in favour of a revolutionary socialist strategy but manage to avoid many of the crude presuppositions which plague Bailley's article. Indeed, attempts are made to tackle some of the major problems facing socialists today. Specifically, they consider three points: the disagreement and confusion among socialists about who are the agents of radical social change; the ability of capitalist societies to accommodate, absorb or repress opposition; and the ambivalent character of "existing" socialism. Discussion of these issues is certainly most welcome. Unfortunately, however, their discussion seems to be underpinned by some untenable (albeit largely implicit) assumptions.

There is a tendency, for example, to economic reductionism. Capitalism — as a particular mode of production — is seen as the cause of both class and non-class oppressions and divisions. They talk of capitalism as the "source" of racial, sexual, national and other oppression, and refer to these "complex patterns of oppression" as "generated by capitalism". It is clear, of course, that racial, sexual and national oppressions are greatly affected by (and, in turn, affect) the way in which production is organised. But this does not mean that we can presuppose that these oppressions are "generated" by that mode of production.

Coates and Looker also tend to see a "socialist upsurge" as the inevitable consequence of the deprivation brought about by capitalist depression — an upsurge which is only held in check by the ruling classes' propitious use of ideology. This seems to me to be fundamentally misconstrued. The task of socialists is not simply to remove ruling class obstacles to an otherwise ready-made pool of support. Rather, the task confronting socialists is to build mass support for a socialist alternative in the first place. And while the economic, political and ideological conditions of any capitalist society establish limits which make this task sometimes more and sometimes less viable, it nevertheless remains our task, both struggling within and against these limits, to build support for socialism ourselves — capitalism will not do it for us.

In fact, the need to build widespread popular support for socialist alternatives provides us with the most basic criterion for comparing different socialist strategies. It points, for example, to a central contradiction facing socialists who work within social democratic (or labour) parties. We can assume that any radical socialist change in Australia will involve a plurality of political forces — a "coalition of the left". It is conceivable, I suppose, that such a coalition may even include some residual social democratic groupings. But before socialists could enter such an alliance, they would have to be sure that they were not going to be co-opted to work towards non-socialist ends. In other words, in order to maintain the socialist orientation of such an alliance socialists could only enter it from a position of strength. And, given our basic commitment to democratic socialist change, this strength can only arise out of widespread popular support.

Socialists in the Labor Party, however, have done exactly the opposite. Rather than winning support for socialism first, and then entering an alliance, they have entered an alliance before this support has been obtained. Lacking the strength to ensure a socialist orientation, they are inevitably co-opted for non-socialist ends. Enormous energy is expended to manage capitalism through the control of parliament. Furthermore, the ability to publicly articulate a socialist alternative is severely restricted: for to do so threatens both the unity and, more importantly, the electoral support for their party.

Socialists in the Labor Party are in a position of checkmate. They cannot give their coalition (the Labor Party) a socialist orientation without building mass support. But, since they are unable to publicly articulate a socialist alternative, they are unable to build this mass support.

Of course, none of this seeks to deny the important tactical advantages which can flow from the presence of socialists in the Labor Party. What it does mean, however, is that an independent socialist or communist party has a crucial role in any viable socialist strategy. More fundamentally still, it means that any discussion of democratic socialist strategies must take as its starting point the need to build widespread popular support for socialism.

It is to the credit of communists and socialists in Australia that many of us are now engaged in just such a discussion. It is a discussion which seeks to come to terms with the crisis in socialism in order to better intervene in, and ultimately overcome, the crisis in capitalism. It is a discussion out of which we will need to generate our own versions of books like Socialist Strategies.

Robin Archer is a student of marxism and an activist in the Administrative and Clerical Officers Association (ACOA).