Remembering the 1930's

How did the economic turbulence of the 1930s affect the people of Michigan? With an unemployment rate of more than 20 percent, a surge of union organizing, and the growth of New Deal programs, most Michiganders were buffeted by the whirlwinds of change that blew over the state and nation during that decade. Whether it was through the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, or the rise of the United Auto Workers and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, few families were unaffected by the social maelstrom that the ‘30s brought.

To chronicle the 1930s and the Great Depression, Macomb Community College has brought together exhibits, speakers, presentations, artifacts, and videos from now through April 8 at the Lorenzo Cultural Center and the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts, located on the eastern edge of the metro Detroit area, at 44575 Garfield Rd. at Hall Rd. in Clinton Township.

Retired UAW Vice President Marc Stepp, labor historian Steve Babson, and Michigan Labor History Society board member Mike Kerwin will be among the speakers at the events, and the labor jazz opera, “Forgotten: The Murder at the Ford Rouge Plant,” will have a return engagement on March 26.

Stepp, who worked for 19 years at the Chrysler Highland Park plant before rising through positions of union leadership and becoming, in 1974, a vice president of the UAW, will present an overview of union organization in the auto industry. He will speak at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, April 28.

Babson, a retired professor in the labor studies program at Wayne State University and principal author of the book, “Working Detroit,” will trade the ebb and flow of working-class activity and union organization in Detroit, speaking at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, March 10.

And Kerwin will look at how the Great Depression impacted factory workers and
their reaction, including formation of the UAW, comparing their situation to what factory workers are facing today. His presentation, “Factory Workers in the 1930s and Today: This Is Not Your Grandparents’ Depression,” will take place at 11 a.m. Wednesday, April 7.

Other programs will look at the WPA in Detroit, the Diego Rivera “Detroit Industry” murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts, life in the CCC camps, and the impact of Frank Murphy, who served as both Detroit mayor and Michigan governor during this era. A special speakers series includes historian Alan Brinkley speaking on “Legacies of the New Deal” on April 28, and historian David Kennedy speaking on “The Great Depression Revisited” on March 11. “Forgotten” will be presented on March 26.

Four exhibits, “And Still TheyProspered,” a multimedia exploration of the defining aspects of the Great Depression era, includes timelines, photos artifacts, and audio and video presentations; The Way We Worked, documenting changes in work and workplaces, immigration, and labor; Uneasy Years: Michigan Jewry During Depression and War; and the Clarke Family Quilt Collection will be on display.

A complete schedule of speakers, exhibits, videos, and more is available at www.lorenzoculturalcenter.org or by calling 586-445-7348. Admission to all events is free, except for the Speakers Series and “Forgotten,” and there is ample free parking.