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WORLDWIDE

# GLOBAL VIEW

Notes



## Working with Labor Unions at U.S. Exhibitions

By Michelle Bruno

**T**rade show labor union practices are baffling to many foreign companies exhibiting in the U.S. While many countries employ organized labor in the trade show setting, union workers overseas generally play a more passive role and work rules are considerably subtler. Not so in cities across the U.S. where the union culture is deeply engrained in the fabric of the industry. Understanding the rules and influence of labor unions can help international participants navigate the complexities of exhibiting in American trade shows and reduce the costs to exhibit.

### Work rules vary from state to state

There is no uniformity from state to state regarding the jurisdiction of specific labor unions or whether or not union laborers are required at all for trade show services. Further, the unions in some cities enforce work rules more strongly (New York), while other cities are more flexible (Anaheim). Many shows support an “Exhibitor’s Bill of Rights” that details what exhibitors can and cannot do or what services union laborers **MUST** perform in a specific city/venue. Often, this document is listed on the exhibition website.

### Different unions can have jurisdiction over the same trade show

In large cities where labor unions are influential and plentiful, several unions can have jurisdiction over the same show by dividing up the services among themselves. One trade show can involve laborers from the electricians (electrical), plumbers (plumbing), riggers (lifting), material handlers (delivery of equipment to/from booth), carpenters (construction/booth assembly), millwrights (machinery assembly) and decorators (sign hanging) unions. Sometimes, different convention centers in the same city have different union jurisdictions—a situation that can cause ill will between competing unions. Floor managers (show management representatives) and general contractors can help exhibitors understand which groups are responsible for what services.

### Gratuity is a slippery slope

Offering cash gratuities to union laborers in exchange for extra services or special treatment is not recommended either by the unions or general

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contractors and display houses that manage the union workers. For one thing, it isn't always clear who to pay the gratuities to. Second, tips of any amount may not be able to remedy a situation; for example, at the end of the show when workers are moving quickly to return empty crates to the exhibit booths and exhibitors "pay" to have their crates returned sooner rather than later. The reality is, the crates are stacked and stored in large areas. It is nearly impossible for workers to locate specific crates before they emerge from the storage area.

### Being on site can make a huge difference

Because union laborers charge by the hour, sometimes with high minimum charges involving a 2 to 3 man crew, it is critical for exhibitors to be on site before the work of installation and dismantling begins. Every minute spent unpacking blueprints or getting organized is an expense incurred for idle workers. Exhibitors should also coordinate with the freight forwarder/customs broker to make sure that the freight is delivered the day before (or earlier) and accounted for so that work can commence on schedule.

### Overtime work can add significant expense

Although overtime work is sometimes unavoidable because of the dates of the trade show, exhibitors should attempt to manage the amount of time that laborers spend working past regular (straight time) work hours. In most cities overtime begins at 4:30 p.m. (16:30). On holidays, the labor rate is often double the straight-time rate.

### Right to Work states allow exhibitors to perform their own work

In some states, workers are not required to be members of unions in order to work and trade show contractors can hire non-union workers to perform services. Further, exhibitors can perform a great number of services on their own, although usually the rules prohibit the use of lifting equipment. Almost half (23) of the states in the U.S. have Right to Work laws.



### A violation of union rules can have repercussions

In an exhibition setting, time is of the essence. Sometimes, international (and domestic) exhibitors—those unaware of the work rules or those who believe they won't get caught—attempt to circumvent the unions. This type of non-compliance can cause repercussions for the exhibitors: work rules that union representatives could be flexible on are strictly enforced, a work stoppage pushes the eventual resolution of the issues into overtime labor hours, work orders are delayed because labor is unavailable or less skilled laborers are sent to the exhibit booth.

The bottom line for international exhibitors is to understand the union labor rules, work practices and rights of exhibiting companies before arriving to the show. The larger the exhibit, the more important it is to understand those important details and plan for them. Freight forwarders/customs brokers can lend a helping hand because they are familiar with the union jurisdictions and processes in each of the venues; however show management is the best resource for providing accurate information or a contact person to clarify the rules that are in place.

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