

Muni operators who shorten runs given warning

Rachel Gordon, Chronicle Staff Writer

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For years, some Municipal Railway light-rail vehicle operators would decide on their own to cut short their runs to the Outer Sunset - booting off the passengers on their trains with little or no notice - and head back downtown.

They were told on Tuesday that if they do that again without getting official approval, they could be fired immediately.

The unauthorized practice only recently got Muni management to take action amid complaints from Supervisor Carmen Chu, who represents the Sunset District on the Board of Supervisors, Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco, and neighborhood activists.

The shortened runs have meant that some passengers had to wait for the next streetcar to show up - which Muni regulars know can be a long wait - or walk the rest of the way to their intended destination.

"It's been a real problem - not one isolated incident," said Chu. "The service being promised by Muni was not being delivered."

Late last month, Muni management removed the hand tools, known as switch irons, carried in each streetcar that allow Muni workers to operate the switchbacks and move their trains to tracks heading in the opposite direction. The idea behind taking away the switch irons was to force operators to call for assistance if they wanted to reverse course. That meant, however, that a supervisor would have to be called to the scene to work the switchback, a potentially time-consuming process.

On Tuesday, Muni managers announced they worked out a deal with the operators union and would return the switch irons to the streetcars beginning today.

"We wanted to get their attention," Ken McDonald, chief operating officer for the city's transit agency, said of the temporary confiscation of the switch irons. "They know we're serious."

Irwin Lum, president of Transport Workers Union, Local 250-A, said he understands management's concerns. But taking away the switch irons, he said, "was treating the operators like they're children."

A bulletin jointly crafted by Muni management and union leadership, issued Tuesday, said the "importance of obtaining prior authorization before any use of switch irons is mandatory. Unauthorized use directly affects the safety of passengers, rail personnel and equipment." Violation of the policy, the bulletin stated, could lead to "immediate termination."

It's unclear how often renegade operators took it upon themselves to alter their scheduled runs. But it was frequent enough to not go unnoticed.

Anna Chung said it happened to her earlier this summer when she was taking the L-Taraval to her mother's house near Ocean Beach from her accounting job downtown.

"We were riding along, and I think it was around 19th Avenue that the driver told everyone they had to get off and catch the next train," she said. "We waited about 10 minutes for the next L to come. We all piled on. People were mad."

Operators contacted by The Chronicle wouldn't talk for attribution about why they sometimes felt the need to abort their runs before the end of the line, but two who spoke on condition that their names not be used said some operators felt under pressure to keep to schedule.

"If they were running behind, they could play catch-up on the return trip," said one veteran operator.

Nathaniel Ford, executive director of the Municipal Transportation Agency, said running behind schedule is no excuse for the renegade action, especially at the expense of passengers whose rides are cut short without warning. He said it is the job of street inspectors and central control to take command of the runs. "You can't just have operators making those decisions on their own," he said.

E-mail Rachel Gordon at rgordon@sfgate.com

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