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## Controversy surrounds automated train system

STAFF WRITER

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The subway's embattled boss had no time for questions. "Have to go, sorry," Lawrence Reuter told reporters after a Metropolitan Transportation Authority committee hearing last week. "Not now."



An underling appeared before the committee to explain delays in the city's first computerized train line, which has already cost the authority about \$300 million.

The revolutionary system is called Communication-Based Train Control and, when it becomes fully operational, it will essentially take train operations out of a motorman's hands.

The space between trains, their speeds and when they stop and go will be entirely controlled by computers that communicate via radio signals. This will mean more trains at higher speeds, less waiting time and shorter rides. No argument there.

But another stage in the revolution begins in June, when conductors are to be eliminated from trains on the same line, the Canarsie.

The money-saving program, called "One-Person Train Operation," or OPTO, would have train operators opening doors, making announcements and evacuating trains. Much controversy has centered on the latter, with elected officials, union members and transit advocates warning of danger in having a lone crew member responsible for a packed train during a disaster.

Which brings us back to Reuter and his efforts to elude reporters at MTA headquarters on Tuesday -- just three days after the authority's first ever OPTO drill proved, well, disastrous.

What was Reuter going to say? What drill? The whole exercise lasted a mere 19 minutes.

In fact, the public wouldn't know about the authority's failed OPTO drill if not for the Transport Workers Union Local 100 members who were there as observers. And don't look for them to be invited to future drills.

According to longtime train operators Dennis Boyd and B.J. Small, the drill, near Brooklyn's Graham Avenue station, ended when the motorman mistakenly pulled an emergency alarm box in the subway tunnel. His actions caused several other trains, with real riders, to stall along the L line.

The motorman evacuated about 100 transit workers posing as riders along a narrow catwalk in the

tunnel. He failed to check on several nonambulatory riders who remained on the trains. He left doors open in the eight-car train, allowing cars to fill with smoke. The mock passengers eventually evacuated themselves. "The whole thing was a circus," Boyd said.

On Wednesday, transit bosses huddled with police and fire commanders at NYC Transit headquarters in Brooklyn to discuss the drill. The union, whose members actually evacuate trains during emergencies, wasn't invited.

"We learned a few things about power removal and communications," said Assistant Chief Edward Kilduff, the fire department's Brooklyn borough commander. "From our standpoint, there were many more positives than negatives."

In an interview, Kilduff provided more details of the drill. Firefighters arrived at the Graham Avenue station at 10:24 a.m., several minutes after the alarm. It took eight minutes for track power to be cut.

"It takes a little time," he said. "We don't rush right to the train."

"As we're approaching the train, at 10:39 a.m., we received a call from the BMT line saying the drill needed to be suspended because of a power-off issue," the chief added. "Apparently, power was also removed from another segment of the line, which nobody at the time knew happened."

By the time firefighters reached five nonambulatory riders stranded on the smoky trains, the drill was over.

Was the lone motorman overwhelmed by events?

"I couldn't comment on that," he said. "I don't know what their procedure is, and I still don't know what there procedure is."

The drill is being rescheduled.

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