

## LONG ISLAND / TRANSPORTATION

# Gov. Cuomo denounces 'sabotage,' stands behind new MTA inspector general



Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo responds to reporters questions about overtime abuse and other issues at the Metropolitan Transit Authority in Manhattan on May 12. Photo Credit: Charles Eckert

**By Alfonso A. Castillo**

alfonso.castillo@newsday.com [@alfonsoreports](#)

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Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on Thursday said taxpayers will not tolerate getting ripped off when it comes to possible overtime fraud, and he defended new MTA Inspector General Carolyn Pokorny for bringing “long overdue” accountability to the embattled transit authority.

Speaking to reporters during an event in Bellport Thursday, Cuomo stood by his handpicked watchdog for the MTA, who on Wednesday announced she was investigating the apparent “sabotage” of a new biometric timekeeping device at the LIRR’s Jamaica Station.

“New Yorkers are willing to pay for mass transit . . . But what the people of New York deserve and demand is accountability, efficiency and effectiveness. What the people of this state will not tolerate is getting ripped off,” Cuomo said. “And you get paid to come to work. We expect you to come to work. So the inspector general is bringing an air of accountability to the MTA that I believe is long overdue.”

The MTA recently began installing the new time clocks at all employee facilities as part of its effort to address alarmingly high overtime rates among some employees, as uncovered in an April report by the nonprofit Empire Center for Public Policy.

The report revealed that the MTA’s top earner in 2018, LIRR chief measurement officer Thomas Caputo, made \$344,147 in overtime on top of his base salary of \$117,499.

Workers recently discovered that a newly installed ethernet wire had been cut before the devices could be set up. A note left beside the cut cable addressed to “my fellow crazy coworkers” asked that they not “cut the cord

again."

Pokorny's office said Thursday it is continuing its investigation of the Jamaica incident, including by reviewing surveillance video taken at the station and looking into whether there is a larger, systemic problem throughout the agency. The Queens district attorney, the U.S. attorney for the Southern District and the MTA inspector general are all looking into potential overtime abuse at the authority.

"No labor union will defend criminality or fraud. And, an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, yes. But no union should defend criminality or fraud," Cuomo said. "And if it's one bad apple, it's one bad apple. But you need the system in place to make sure you can say to the people of this state: People are working and you're getting your money's worth."

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On Thursday, Christopher Natale, general chairman of the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen Local 56, which represents the LIRR workers who installed the systems, questioned the legitimacy of the incident.

"All of a sudden it appears out of nowhere. Here's the brand new IG standing there with a cut wire and all of the evidence sitting right there in front of her for that one picture," Natale said, referencing a photo of Pokorny that appeared on the cover of the New York Post Thursday. "It seems awfully staged . . . Wow, that couldn't make for a better picture, could it?"

Anthony Simon, general chairman of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers, on Thursday also objected to Pokorny's handling of the case. In a press release Thursday, Simon asked MTA leadership and the media to show "restraint regarding the constant daily unconfirmed accusations and negative press, aimed at railroad workers so we can avoid the inevitable distractions that can affect the focus of workers who are responsible for the safety of the riding public."

Simon said the cut wire may have been the result of "installation issues," and pointed out that the new biometric timekeeping devices had never been activated at the facility.

"They're making the story sound like somebody sabotaged the clock to not punch in and out, and that's not the case," Simon said. "We are not and will never condone somebody doing something that's bad behavior or anything along those lines. But we really should be mindful of the fact that we need to investigate before we accuse."



In a statement Thursday, Pokorny, said she believes “the vast majority of MTA employees are hardworking and honest.” But she said, during visits to subway worker facilities in Manhattan and Coney Island Thursday, she saw first-hand the use of “outdated” timekeeping systems that are vulnerable to misuse.

“Punch card time-keeping clocks with no identity verification mechanism belong in the Transit Museum, not a modern rail yard,” Pokorny said. “This is a failure of the management system, and taxpayers and riders deserve more. The MTA, with more than 74,000 employees, should have a state-of-the-art employee time management system in place to ensure the public trust.”

John Samuelson, international president of the Transport Workers Union, which represents subway laborers, said he’s not opposed to the use of more modern timekeeping systems, which he said will result in more jobs and overtime because of the need to maintain the devices. But he questioned the wisdom of spending millions of dollars on the new technology while workers are forced to keep the subway system together “using toothpicks and Band-Aids.”



**By Alfonso A. Castillo**

alfonso.castillo@newsday.com  @alfonsoreports

Alfonso Castillo has been reporting for Newsday since 1999 and covering the transportation beat since 2008. He grew up in the Bronx and Queens and now lives in Valley Stream with his wife and two sons.

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