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SEEK Sit In: Residence Is Kept

By Jacquelyne Taub

SEEK students scored a victory over the summer when, by sitting in at the payroll office of the Board of Higher Education (BHE), they managed to retain their residency at the Paris Hotel, the official CUNY residence for needy students, for at least the next year.

The BHE had decided to terminate student use of the hotel, but was forced, along with Chancellor Robert Kibbee and Bureau of the Budget Official Robert Bott, to capitulate under the vocal and well-publicized action of the SEEK students.

The final agreement under which the students agreed to vacate the BHE office stipulated that students could maintain occupancy for the next year but that the program would be gradually phased out within the following two years.

The Paris Hotel is a huge establishment located on 97th St. and West End Ave. with 800 rooms, 300 of which are continually vacant or uninhabitable. It has been the official residence for needy CUNY students for the last seven years. The entire year's bill for the 150 students now living there is \$250,000.

According to the director of

the Resident Student Program, Sam Brown, the decision to end the residence program "is a compromise between the Chancellor and Robert Bott. This is not a question of money. The whole thing is political." He continued, "The Chancellor is saying that the budget must be decreased, but there are games being played here. CUNY is not under the jurisdiction of the Mayor." He vowed that the students would continue to fight. "Whatever is necessary to do will be done," he said.

The demonstration outside the hotel took place on August 15th, the day after students agreed to leave the BHE offices. The SEEK students received no written or verbal support from any of the college presidents, SEEK directors, or the SEEK Central Administration at that time. Sam Brown was especially critical of

Dean Young, who is top administrator at SEEK Central, and who presides over all the individual college SEEK directors, saying, "All he does is give lip service support, but he never does anything." Many of the students active in the takeover felt the same way.

According to Professor Milton Martin, Director of SEEK at Hunter, "It was a partial victory for the students. One thing they have to remember is that students have a legal right to a residence," but he also said, "They were ready to throw them out and they've got to stay . . . The students are prepared for a long struggle." Of Dean Young he said, "Let's just say that SEEK Central hasn't been terribly supportive."

The Paris Hotel, an old single-room occupancy edifice of 22

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floors, typical of low cost upper west side residences for the needy or elderly, is in generally poor condition. Its former stateliness and elegance can still be seen in the marble walls, deep pile carpet and deep arm chairs of the inner lobby, yet interviews with students and a tour of the rooms revealed the widespread disrepair that students claim has existed since they moved in.

The rooms are tiny rectangular vestibules with one large casement window at the far end. A bed, desk, bureau, and chair, are provided by the Hotel. A bathroom is located at the front, as one enters, containing a sink, toilet and stall shower. The water in the sink of most rooms is a rusty brown trickle and many toilets work only sporadically or not at all.

The air conditioner, an enormous unit taking up half of the window space, explained one student "doesn't work. They turned off the fuses. Anyway there are roaches in most of them." The temperature in the room reaches into the 90's on an August day and students are afraid to leave their doors ajar as they sleep at night because "whores and pimps are known to operate out of this building especially in the summer," one said.

The plaster on the walls and ceilings is mostly chipped and students have had to be relocated in many instances due to the bad condition of the walls. The rooms, instead of being painted, are whitewashed. For the approximately 500 residents of the hotel there are three elevators. Two have been out of service for the past five months.

Both the management and the tenants of the Hotel are pleased that the students will be able to stay. "We like the students," the general manager said. Rumor has it that if the students were to be denied occupancy, the hotel might have to be closed down from lack of funds.

SEEK students are not completely satisfied with their agreement with the Board of Higher Education. But their meetings with Chancellor Kibbee and the extension of their lease at the hotel was encouraging. One woman from City College said, "It's a good program; otherwise we wouldn't be able to go to college and finish our education." She attributed the recent acquiescence by the Board to the fact that "SEEK students are the most politicized. They have to be."