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40 Rights Lawyers Debating Protest

Justice Department lawyers angered by the administration's recent civil rights moves are still debating what form of protest to present to their superior, Assistant Attorney General Jerris Leonard, and Attorney General John N. Mitchell.

The lawyers, more than 40 of whom met at a colleague's apartment Tuesday night to air their grievances, maintained silence yesterday about their incipient revolt.

It was learned, however, that the dissidents had not yet agreed upon the form of a statement they plan to submit to their superiors. A proposed draft circulated at the Tuesday night meeting was not endorsed as the consensus of the group.

One of the Civil Rights Division lawyers said they were embarrassed that any news of the meeting leaked to the press. They had planned to submit a statement to Leonard and Mitchell before making it public.

About half the division's working staff of some 85 working attorneys were represented at the Tuesday session. Many other were out of town on assignment.

Although the lawyers themselves were saying nothing yesterday, their meeting drew praise from at least one prominent critic of the administration's civil rights record.

Clifford L. Alexander, who resigned as chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission with a blast at the administration, said "I commend them for courageously standing up for en-

forcement of the laws of the land and the decisions of the Supreme Court."

Another former Johnson administration official, who did not want to be named, predicted that "a lot of people in government—not just in Justice—are going to be protesting."

The Civil Rights Division lawyers' grievances reportedly have been mounting over a period of several months but reached the stage of organized dissent only this week.

The lawyers have been unhappy over the administration's modification of school desegregation deadlines and its proposed modification of the Voting Rights Act. But it was Leonard's pleading in a Mississippi federal court in favor of extending school desegregation deadlines in that state that triggered the revolt.

One Capitol Hill source said yesterday that Leonard himself argued the government's position because none of his staff agreed with it.

Leonard's predecessor as head of the Civil Rights Division, Stephen J. Pollak, said the lawyers' action would be "very valuable in pointing up the questions that have been raised" about present civil rights policy.

Pollak called the Mississippi action "the most significant civil rights retreat in many years."

HEW Secretary Robert Finch, Pollak said, "said he needed more time because of administrative problems. That's the game the defendants tried to play a long time ago."