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Australia News Hit For Bias

By John Saar
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SYDNEY, Dec. 8—A conscience strike by 400 of the country's leading journalists added a new strain to Australia's bitter election campaign today and lent credence to charges of press bias made by Labor Party leader Gough Whitlam.

Citing "repeated and continuing bias" against the Labor Party, the journalists in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra called a 36-hour strike against three major newspapers run by international newspaper tycoon Rupert Murdoch. The three papers run by Murdoch's News Ltd. are the serious national paper The Australian, and two tabloids—The Daily Mirror and The Daily Telegraph.

The papers all appeared today, however, and company spokesmen said executives would continue to bring the papers out. Sources at the papers said the journalists called the strike because they could no longer tolerate weighting of the news in favor of Liberal candidate Malcolm Fraser and "gross distortions" in the coverage of former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

The row has been brewing for weeks. In the six-week period of parliamentary deadlock which preceded dismissal of the Whitlam government last month, reporters were complaining of management of the news. Allegations were made against other papers but centered around the three News Ltd. papers published in Sydney.

The reporters claimed that stories favorable to Whitlam were rejected, or rewritten and downplayed.

The journalists' complaints must be weighed against their private support for the Labor Party—as high as 95 per cent according to one estimate—and the reality that the campaign so far has been a disaster for Whitlam.

There have been several examples in the past week, however, which appear to bear out some complaints.

An allegedly new piece of evidence on a long-running loans scandal unearthed by a weekly magazine received major treatment in the Murdoch papers. One of the two Murdoch tabloids carried a blazing front-page headline "Gough's Guilty." The story was later denied.

In an interview last week, Whitlam charged bias in the news reporting of the Murdoch papers. Whitlam suggested that Murdoch turned on the Labor Party after his application to develop a bauxite deposit in partnership with an international aluminum company was turned down.

In a subsequent television interview, Murdoch denied any bias in the news columns of the three papers. He also denied that his editorial turn against the Labor Party had anything to do with the failed bauxite application.

The reporters' strike underlines the curious relationship between the two candidates for prime minister and the press in this election campaign. Although the reporters covering Whitlam blame him for many of Labor's mistakes in office, they like him personally almost to a man.

Fraser by contrast seems to regard his assigned press corps with something between suspicion and hostility. Yet his speeches get good play.