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The ultra-right Uline

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June 17, 2019



The Uihlein family grew rich by owning Schlitz beer for a century.

Whenever you see the ULINE trademark on plastic trash cans or any other cleaning and business supplies, think of the word “bigot.” That’s because the outfit’s private

owners, Richard and Elizabeth Uihlein, are two of the biggest bankrollers of racism and reaction.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, [the Uihleins donated nearly \\$40 million to right-wing candidates in the 2018 elections.](#)

In 2017, [Richard Uihlein gave \\$100,000 to Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore](#) even after he was accused of serial sexual assault. (Chicago Tribune, Nov. 28, 2017)

In an Illinois school district, Richard Uihlein was the financial angel for an anti-transgender school board candidate.

In his residence of Lake Forest, Ill., “where 90 percent of students are white, [he backed a school board slate led by the chief critic of Lake Forest High School’s first Black principal](#), who had criticized honors classes for tracking Black students into lower classes.”

For 150 years, the Chicago suburb of Lake Forest has been an exclusive enclave for rich families like the Uihleins. Among its former residents was the department store magnate Marshall Field, who insisted that the leaders of the eight-hour workday movement — George Engel, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons and August Spies — be hanged in Cook County Jail on Nov. 11, 1887.

The wealthy in Lake Forest were so afraid at the time that they sold a square mile of land to the U.S. government for just \$10. This was in exchange for [the army establishing Fort Sheridan to protect them against a working-class uprising.](#)

Racist real estate covenants kept African-American and Jewish families out of the suburb until at least the 1960s. Black and Latinx swimmers are kept from Lake Forest’s beaches by an annual \$750 fee for nonresidents. ([“Privilege, Power and Place: The Geography of the American Upper Class” by Stephen R. Higley](#))

The beer destroyed by greed

The commercial data company Dun and Bradstreet reports that [Uline has estimated sales of \\$3.6 billion.](#)

All of it is owned by Richard and Elizabeth Uihlein, which makes them billionaires according to [Forbes magazine](#). The \$40 million the Uihleins gave to bigots could have provided a \$3 per hour wage increase for each of their 6,000 employees.

But Richard Uihlein is no “self-made” tycoon. The Uihlein family grew rich by owning Schlitz beer for a century.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Schlitz and Budweiser traded places several times as the No. 1 selling brand of beer in the U.S. As late as 1977, Schlitz had 14 percent of the market, double the share it had in 1950.

But that wasn't enough profit for Schlitz's CEO, polo-playing Robert Uihlein Jr. He cut expenses by reducing the brewing time from 25 to 21 days and then to 15 days, while it still took 32 to 40 days to make Budweiser. Corn syrup was used by Schlitz to replace some of the malted barley, while cheaper hop pellets were substituted for fresh hops.

Uihlein figured that workers were too stupid to notice the gradual decline in taste. Of course, only Uihlein is that stupid and beer drinkers did notice the lower quality. [Schlitz, with plants around the country, went into free fall.](#) Workers' control of industry would have stopped this fiasco.

Thousands of union jobs were lost but the Uihlein fortune — interlocked with other Midwestern banking and business families — remained.

What happened to Wisconsin?

Wisconsin was considered a progressive state and a union stronghold. The Badger state passed the first workers' compensation law in the U.S. in 1911.

So how was Gov. Scott Walker able to attack the public workers' unions and pass a "right-to-work" union busting law?

In 1976, this writer heard Assemblyman Lloyd Barbee declare, "Wisconsin is a progressive state for white people." Barbee, who died in 2002, and Vel Phillips, who passed away last year, were two leaders of Milwaukee's Black community.

In 2010, [one out of every 25 African Americans in Wisconsin](#) — from the newborn in an incubator to an elder trying to blow out a hundred candles — were incarcerated. Wisconsin in 2013 had the country's [highest incarceration rate for Indigenous people](#).

Milwaukee was the last big manufacturing center that the Great Migration of African Americans came to. It wasn't until 1951 that any African Americans were hired in any of Milwaukee's breweries, despite the Schlitz brewery being located next to the heart of the Black community at the time. ("Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45," by Joe William Trotter Jr.)

In 1973, members of the American Servicemen's Union staged an action demanding jobs at Schlitz, which sold a lot of beer to GIs in Vietnam.

The Uihleins and the other wealthy families in Milwaukee were never progressive and helped keep Milwaukee, along with Chicago, two of the most segregated cities in the U.S. The Milwaukee Police Department killed four Black people in December 1974, including 16-year-old Jerry Brookshire on Christmas Eve.

Over 50,000 union jobs were lost in Milwaukee County because of deliberate deindustrialization. But in 2018, voters threw Scott Walker out of Wisconsin's governor's mansion. They elected the African American Mandela Barnes as

lieutenant governor.

Uline workers need a union. They'll force the Uihleins to sign a union contract, just like the workers at Schlitz did.

The writer was an organizer of the 1973 ASU action at Schlitz.

