This being Black History Month, I thought it would be worthwhile looking at the fossil fuel industry's racial history. Given the historic concentration of the oil and coal industries in the South, it is no surprise to find that these industries have also been deeply entangled with Jim Crow and its legacy of discrimination.

Oil and gas. The oil industry has a long, deplorable history on race issues. The oil industry began in rural Pennsylvania but soon centered in Oklahoma and Texas. Oil towns like Tulsa were famous for racism, with the Tulsa white riots of 1921 the most visible example. Although Blacks thrived in other blue collar sectors like lumber in the early Twentieth Century, they got vanishingly few jobs from oil companies. In contrast to white workers, such Black workers as there were were forced to live in tents and find their own food, often by hunting.

When the oil industry moved into Mexico, it continued its discriminatory policies. According to a historian of the period, American oil companies limited Black and Chicano workers to "the hot, dirty, and unskilled jobs: clearing land, doing laundry, cooking and washing, cleaning buildings, and carrying equipment."

The oil and gas industry hasn't succeeded in escaping this history of discrimination. In 1996, Texaco entered into a $176 million settlement of a class action for racial discrimination. Even five years ago, black workers reportedly had fewer than 10% of industry jobs (and only 4% in oil and gas extraction). Their average pay was 20% lower than the average for white workers.

Coal. Government statistics show that only 3% of those in the coal mining industry today are black. The history of race is different in coal than it was for oil. A century ago, there were a significant number of black coal miners. In 1909, Blacks made up 20% of West Virginia coal miners. Even in deeply racist Alabama, Black miners were a major part of the workforce:

"In 1930 almost 13,000 African Americans worked in the coal mines around Birmingham, Alabama. They made up 53 percent of the mining workforce and some 60 percent of their union's local membership. At the close of the twentieth century, only about 15 percent of Birmingham's miners were black, and the entire mining workforce had been sharply reduced."

What happened between then and now to leave the industry so heavily dominated by whites today? The problem was that, although blacks had jobs, those were primarily the lowest level manual labor. As coal mining became increasingly

mechanized, Black workers were the first ones to go because they had always been relegated to low-skilled work.

The better historical record of the coal industry compared with oil and gas seems to have been in part due to the threat of unions. In need of labor, coal companies imported foreign works and hired blacks, partly in the hope that ethnic divisions would head off unionization. Once the UMW became established, it helped protect Black miners against the worst threats of racism. The oil industry didn't have a parallel history of unionization. But coal ended up in the same place as oil, because Jim Crow left Black workers the most vulnerable to technological change.

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In sum, the racial history of the oil and gas industry seems to have been much worse, associated with more virulent and blatant racism. Blacks were nearly excluded from the industry. In contrast, blacks found jobs in the coal industry, but only at the bottom of the job ladder. Those bottom rungs were decimated by new technology. In the end, the result in both industries was much the same: a workforce largely empty of Black faces.