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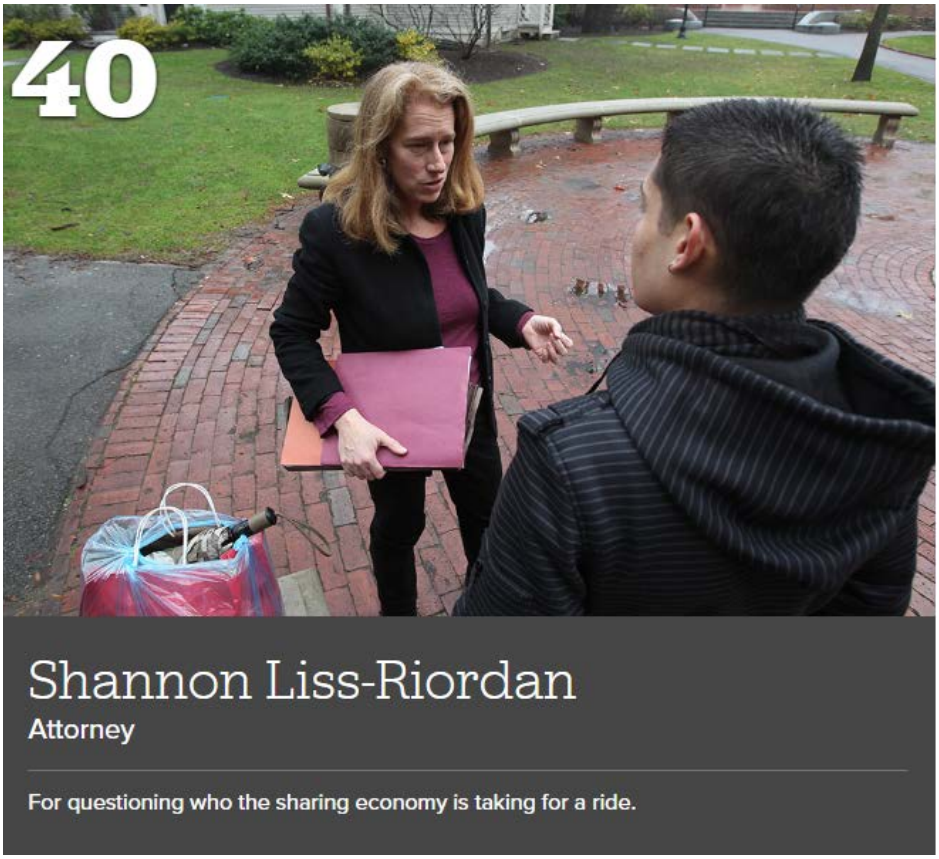

Suzanne Kreiter/The Boston Globe/Getty Images

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To most people in Silicon Valley, the "sharing economy" represents a transformational business model—a new kind of company, and a new kind of work, poised to revolutionize the economy and free workers from the chains of a single employer

To Shannon Liss-Riordan, the sharing economy is a huge yellow light, and she's been arguing in courts that what companies tout as "bold" and "disruptive" isn't much more than a clever packaging of a corporate strategy to rip off workers. She points out that Lyft and Uber drivers, along with most workers in the sharing economy, are classified as independent contractors, which means that, by law, they don't receive many labor protections available to actual employees, including the minimum wage, overtime pay, worker safety protections, unemployment insurance, health insurance and more.

Since 2013, Liss-Riordan has represented thousands of Uber and Lyft drivers in cases across the country. In April, Uber agreed to settle two of those class-action cases, in Massachusetts and California, for up to $100 million, offering to provide a fuller explanation to drivers who might be banned from the app and allowing them to form “drivers’ associations,” quasi-unions that will meet with Uber each year but do not have collective bargaining rights. Although a federal judge in August rejected the settlement, sending the two sides back to negotiations, the point of Liss-Riordan’s litigation is increasingly clear: Even a brave new workplace is still a workplace, and the new companies of the sharing economy don’t have a free pass to use the halo of innovation to mask old-fashioned strong-arming. It’s a fight with 50-state consequences.