

## **GRANITO DE ARENA, A FILM BY JILL FRIEDBERG**

By Christy Thornton

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*Granito de Arena*, a film by Jill Friedberg, Corrugated Films,  
US/Mexico 2005, 62 minutes.

In 2002, the world bank offered a “Programmatic Economic Development Loan” of \$40 million to the state of Chiapas, Mexico, that would ostensibly improve the “quality, quantity and targeting of public services” in Mexico’s poorest state. According to the Project Information Document, available on the World Bank’s Web site, the Bank anticipated “that better spending in [health and education would] contribute significantly to the reduction of poverty by giving people access to knowledge and by improving their well-being.”

Paradoxically, the Bank sought to improve “access to knowledge” for some of Mexico’s most impoverished citizens by making the loan conditional upon the partial privatization of the publicly run normales rurales, rural colleges dating back to the Mexican Revolution that have offered their students—many from poor, indigenous communities—free tuition, free room and board, and guaranteed employment as schoolteachers upon graduation. The Bank hoped that “by showing the other states of the Mexican federation that structural adjustment is possible and rewarding, even in the state that is often regarded as the most backward, the Chiapas program will constitute an unprecedented example.”

The reform of the normales in Chiapas certainly became an example for the country, and indeed the world—though not in the way the Bank had hoped. When the Governor of Chiapas imposed a standardized exam for graduation from the normales, claiming there were not enough teaching positions in Chiapas for the graduates, students and teachers from one of the normales, called “Mactumactza,” took to the streets in protest. When the Governor reacted by canceling the semester, teachers, students and their families occupied the school. The government responded with overwhelming force, using tear gas and physical violence to remove the protesters from Mactumactza.

As Jill Friedberg’s riveting documentary, *Granito de Arena* (Little Grain of Sand), begins, the audience finds itself inside Mactumactza as it comes under siege. As the eyes of a hysterical toddler and his mother are flooded with fresh water to flush out the tear gas, another distraught mother screams, “We’re fighting because we’re poor and we have to.” Men are brutally thrown to the ground and repeatedly punched and kicked by security forces; a school staffer, with blood running down her neck, describes how the police broke the windows to come in and bring the protesters out. In the ensuing conflict, which lasted for weeks, 150 teachers and students were arrested and tortured, and a bus driver was shot and killed. A caravan was mobilized from Mactumactza to Mexico City, hundreds of protesters shook down the gates of the Secretary of the Interior and pressured the government into negotiations. Ultimately, however, the World Bank’s vision prevailed, and Mactumatza

was all but destroyed.

But even as the buildings at Mactumactza are torn down, the movement that continues to fight for the preservation of free, public education in Mexico—guaranteed under Article III of Mexico’s 1910 constitution—is strengthened. Friedberg displays masterful documentary skills, exploring the long history of struggle for democratization within the teachers’ union in Mexico. She traces the movement from its roots in 1979 with the creation of the dissident National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers, la CNTE, through to the massive strikes of 1989 that ousted the corrupt union leader Carlos Jongitud Barrios. In addition, she documents the gradual shift toward the privatization of education, from the emergence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which established public education as a “tradable service” in Mexico, to Vicente Fox’s program of escuelas de calidad (“quality schools”), which rely almost exclusively on standardized testing—with easy parallels to the “No Child Left Behind” programs here in the United States.

But Friedberg’s documentation of the resistance to privatization looks deeper than the street mobilizations used so effectively by la CNTE and its allies, and examines the internal, community-based struggles of the teachers as they seek not just access to education, but to health care, good jobs and social justice. As a teacher in Oaxaca puts it, “Where we are really going to transform society isn’t in the marches, it’s in the communities.” In this way, Friedberg offers a brief but profound look into a tremendously important model for community-based resistance to the imperatives of neoliberal globalization, demonstrating the power of each community in the struggle to offer its little grain of sand.

### **About the Author**

Christy Thornton is NACLA's executive director.