Wayne Parry, The Associated Press 1:28 p.m. EDT October 25, 2014

Casino union workers demonstrate outside the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort in Atlantic City N.J. on Friday Oct. 24, 2014.(Photo: Wayne Parry, AP)

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — The battle over the future of the Trump Taj Mahal entered what could be its final phase on Friday as union picket lines went up outside the struggling casino, which even its would-be savior says is likely to close.

The demonstration came a day after billionaire Carl Icahn told The Associated Press the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort "will almost certainly close" and he wishes he'd never answered the phone when owner Trump Entertainment Resorts approached him about taking it over and investing $100 million to keep it afloat.

About 500 union members chanted and marched on the sidewalk in front of the casino, demanding the restoration of their health care. They did not block entrances, and numerous cars drove up to the casino's main entrance without difficulty, though pedestrians had to sometimes walk in the street to avoid the pickets.

Trump Entertainment CEO Robert Griffin said the demonstration was having no effect on business inside the casino.

Trump Entertainment had been threatening to close the casino on Nov. 13 over the objections of Local 54 of the Unite-HERE union if it didn't get relief from having to pay insurance and pension costs. Now that it has that relief, it says it will keep the Taj Mahal open through

November but still may shut it by the end of the year if it can't get $175 million in state aid — a request state Senate President Steve Sweeney has rejected.

Last week, a federal bankruptcy court judge in Delaware granted the company's request to terminate its contract with the union. Workers' health coverage ends on Oct. 31.

Cocktail server Patricia Mazur, who has worked at the Taj Mahal since the day it opened in 1990 and is battling a recurrence of breast cancer, said workers have given their lives to the company.

"We all loved the Taj; it's been wonderful," she said. "But it doesn't seem right that this can all be taken away from us so quickly."

She got her doctors to move up a double mastectomy operation to Monday so that it occurs while she still has insurance. After the insurance expires, she has no idea how she will pay for reconstructive surgery and chemotherapy.

Rafael Gonzalez, who has served customers in a players' club lounge for nearly 20 years, said union members need to fight back.

"We deserve to have health care coverage when we work so hard for this company," he said. "I am very angry about this; it's not right."

The company said it's trying to save the Taj Mahal.

"As our employees know, operations at the Taj are in an extremely dire set of circumstances, and we are doing everything we can to try to save the jobs of our loyal employees," Griffin said.

The company is pursuing a complicated plan to transfer ownership to Icahn, who would pump $100 million into the casino if the state aid can be secured.

Union president Bob McDevitt said the workers are going to be heard.

"Mr. Icahn thinks he can get what he wants by using bankruptcy court and hiding behind judges," McDevitt said. "In New Jersey, in this market, that's not the final arbitrator of how it's going to be."

In a letter to Taj Mahal workers, Icahn wrote that he grew up on the streets of New York and learned to fight bullies, accusing McDevitt and Sweeney of lying about his intentions. He said the union and Sweeney are accusing him of trying to take advantage of the company's situation even though no one else is willing to invest a dollar in it.

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